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[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



LESTER, LIKE ONE IN A DREAM, SAW DERRICK CATCH AND HOLD NELL CLOSE TO HIS SIDE.

LITTLE NELL.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

NELL VERIBOND'S pretty face wore a distinctly discontented expression, on that September morning, and from time to time she glanced very ruefully at her little hands. Her task was not a congenial one—that of peeling onions. She had come out in the garden to perform it so that the strong scent should not affect her eyes; but alas, the slender fingers were fast growing brown under the influence of the vegetable juice; what they would look like when she had finished she was afraid to think; but there was nothing for her but obedience, it being a recognised fact in the house that Mrs. Veribond's word was law.

The morning was very warm, and Nell would have infinitely preferred a scamper through the fields with her faithful little terrier Rogue, so she sighed dismally as she dropped another onion into the big earthenware pan, and glanced again

at the many which remained to be peeled. A quick step on the garden path diverted her attention, her eyes brightened a little as she saw a tall, slim young fellow with a dark, eager face advancing.

"Good-morning, Nell," he said, offering a long slender hand; she held out her's as she said, —

"Don't touch it; isn't it an awful fright!"

"I don't think so; but what on earth have you been doing!"

"Getting these horrid things ready for pickling; mother could not spare Phoebe to do it, so she made the task over to me."

"Well, I'll help if you will only show me how," he said, laughing, and dropping upon the seat beside her, "let us be martyrs together."

He looked so unlike a martyr with his radiant dark eyes, and joyous face, that Nell condescended to laugh in unison, giving him by far the lion's share of the work. In fact, after a spell of spasmodic industry, she leaned back in utter idleness, saying imperiously, —

"You are not only to work, but to talk. I want to be amused; have you no news for me? Oh, Derrick, what a deadly lively place Guestland is."

"It is rather tame," he assented; "but it seems pleasant to return to it after months of work in town."

"But there is no return for me," she pouted, "because I never go away."

"Your good time is coming too, Nell; may it come quickly. But really, for once, I have news for you—two important items."

"Then you had best keep one back until I have time to digest the first."

"Cannot possibly oblige you this turn, as somebody else would certainly take advantage of my reticence and self-denial. First let me tell you that Mr. Lester Phillips has arrived at the Hall, and that I have seen him."

"What is he like?" Nell questioned, looking lazily from beneath her wide-brimmed hat at her companion. "Is he old or young; ugly, or the reverse?"

"He is quite a good-looking fellow—tall, broad-shouldered, fair, with a tawny moustache of military type; and I don't suppose he is more than thirty. Apparently he has all the good things—except a wife."

"Then he is single? Oh!" laughing, "what a chance for Stella Golightly!"

"Now that is distinctly nasty," said Derrick, although he laughed too; "but should Mr. Lester Philips fall victim to Stella's charms I am afraid we shall not be allowed to claim friendship with her. It is a terrifying prospect! Cannot you see the doctor toadying to the new man, hearing him talk of the 'one treasure my modest home contains—my daughter who is as lovely as she is good, although it does not become me to praise my own property too highly!' Ha! ha! he!" and so good was his imitation of Doctor Gofflight's manner, his feeble chuckle that Nell laughed until she nearly cried, though she did add,—

"Who is nasty now! You ought to have been a comedian, you are so clever at mimicry."

"Thanks; I believe that is the first compliment you have ever paid me, but I am not likely to adopt your suggestion; by the way, I hope Philips will soon or late give the Hall a nice mistress; he can afford to marry now, though six months ago he was a briefless barrister with no prospect of success, and no expectations to speak of."

"Then why did old Mr. Triplow leave him the Hall and his fortune?"

"Just to spite a distant cousin, and Philips had done him some slight service. Now, I think, we have fairly outworn item number one; item number two concerns only—yours truly, Derrick Lovelace."

"Oh, Derrick, what is it? I am all impatience to hear; don't keep me in suspense."

"Well, I have been successful in my application, and have obtained a berth, value one hundred and fifty pounds per annum. Not so bad for a start, is it Nell?" with an eager glance at her.

"Bad! Why it is splendid. And when do you go? Of course it is in town."

"Yes; I leave here in a fortnight; and I mean to give every attention to my duties; I will rise; I will make a name as one of the foremost engineers of the day, and then Nell, I shall have something to say to you."

The swift colour rushed into the fair, pretty face, the blue eyes were downcast as she said,—

"I shall miss you very much."

"Thank you, dear; and—don't let anybody else teach you to forget me; if only you would write to me now and again—will you?"

"That is a matter for consideration," she answered, with a touch of coquetry, "mother might object, and I am such a wretched correspondent."

"But if you could guess how happy it would make me, your kind little heart could not refuse the favour asked; your letters would be like gleams of sunshine to me."

He was bending low over her; his face instinct with feeling, and if the truth must be confessed, Nell's heart was beating violently, with a sudden rapture, which was not without an element of fear, when a voice close by said,—

"I beg pardon, but is it possible to see Mr. Veribond this morning?"

The young people started guiltily aside. Nell being overwhelmed with confusion, whilst Derrick was not a little annoyed by this inopportune interruption; but he recovered himself sufficiently to say,—

"Miss Veribond is better able to answer you than I. Nell, this is Mr. Lester Philips."

The new-comer bowed gravely and courteously; the girl smiled faintly, then said,—

"I believe my father is in the office; will you follow me, please; it is very much in the rear of the house," and so with a glance at Derrick she led the way, through the garden, across the courtyard to a square of buildings adorned with the words—

"J. Veribond, Corn Merchant."

Mr. Philips rather wished she would go less quickly, and talk more. The brief glimpse he had caught of the fair face with its sunny hair, its pretty blue eyes had been very pleasant. Then, too, the dainty figure in the clean blue cotton gown, was supple, and its movements the perfection of grace. In the hope that she would turn, he said,—

"I must apologise for startling you, also for entering the private part of your premises."

"There is no need for apology," she answered, not glancing back at him. "A stranger could not be expected to find the office easily;" with that she opened a door, and saying, "Father, Mr. Philips wishes to see you," bowed to her companion and retraced her steps.

Bursting into the kitchen where Mrs. Veribond—a small, spare woman of decidedly vinegary aspect—was at work, she said,—

"How annoying it is mother; if ever I am unfit to be seen some one particular is bound to call. A nice impression I've made on Mr. Philips—if it had not been for those horrid onions I should at least have been presentable."

"There is no disgrace in honest labour," snapped her mother. "Where is Derrick?"

"I don't know; I left him at the post of duty," beginning to laugh; "there never was a better servant than he; why, he does his share of the work and mine, too, without one word of complaint; he has been helping me an hour."

"Humph! Idleness is your bane; but 'the labourer is worthy his hire.' Call him in to lunch, there are some beef patties just out of the oven, and a Swiss roll; spread the cloth, Phoebe is too busy, never was such a slow coach either;" and Nell hastened to do her bidding, glad, at least, that with all her faults her mother was not inhospitable.

Then she went to the window calling Derrick Lovelace with new shyness in her voice, in her eyes, and presently the young man was regaling himself with Mrs. Veribond's excellent patties and still more excellent home-brewed ale.

"Well," she said in her tart voice, "have you found work to do? You ought not to be wasting your time and your money loitering here. I have no patience with young people—they are eaten up with pride and selfishness."

Derrick smiled. He was not in the least afraid of this waspish little woman.

"You don't mean that I am a lazy vagabond," he remarked, pleasantly, "I am sure you are only intent upon teasing me. Now, if I were inclined to be brutal I should glory in discomfiting you, but I am not, so will frankly admit I have secured a situation—not a very big thing—but, I take it, a hundred and fifty a-year is better than nothing."

"It isn't much," interrupted this most perfect of wet blankets, "especially in town. Then, you are not certain you will keep it, though I hope you may."

"Until something better turns up," he said, joyfully, and stole a glance at Nell, who, however, did not return it. "Oh, I have plenty of pluck and perseverance, I am sure to get on."

"Pride goeth before a fall," and 'self-praise is no recommendation.'"

"Mother, it is too bad to damp Derrick's spirits, and I think he has done excellently well; then, as we are all so fond of proverbs and trite sayings, we must remember 'Rome wasn't built in a day.'"

Derrick flushed with delight and surprise that Nell should constitute herself his champion; but Mrs. Veribond said even more sourly than usual,—

"And in eighteen years I have failed to teach you good manners or obedience."

Then, thinking a storm was lowering, the young man rushed to the rescue. All the while he was saying to himself what a pity it was Nell's mother was so unlike his own, and what a shameful thing it was to treat the girl so roughly.

Alas! between mother and daughter very little love existed. Mrs. Veribond was not fond of children, but she could better have borne a rough young fellow about the house than so delicate, dainty and pretty a girl as Nell. Then, too, strange as it must seem, she was actually jealous of her husband's love for their child. There were times when Mr. Veribond dared hardly address her in affectionate terms, and when he purchased any gift for her, he must needs procure one of double value for the wife of his bosom, or suffer in consequence.

Not a pleasant woman to live with, if the servants who followed in rapid succession were to be believed. But they all loved Miss Nell with her bright face, her sunny ways, and that

unfailing kindness of heart which more often than not got her into trouble with her mother.

Now she was standing in the sunshine with Derrick, and having apparently dismissed all things unpleasant from her mind, she said,—

"Mr. Philips is really very passable, but I do not like fair men."

"May you never change your taste," cried Dick, "for I am beastly dark."

CHAPTER II.

It was a week later, and Nell stood with Derrick under the bower of clematis which overhung the garden-gate. It was quite dusk there, they were free from all interruption, for Mr. Veribond had driven his wife out to see a sister, and they would not return until late. The gate certainly opened to the road, but by seven o'clock at this season the Guestland working-man was seated by his own fireside, and at no time did many folks pass Cavendish House. Derrick looked troubled and even moody; there was evidently something upon his mind, and of that something he presently spoke.

"Nell, Lester Philips has been here three times since last Saturday."

"Has he?" indifferently, "I really have not counted his visits; but I must confess he improves upon acquaintance; he can talk on any subject."

"No doubt," savagely, "and if occasionally he makes a fool of himself no one will acquaint him with the fact. He is a rich man, and can do no wrong."

"I believe, Derrick, you are cross—but why? I really don't think town life has improved you; you were never disagreeable to me before you left home."

"You had not then given me cause; but I am not going to pretend I like being thrown over for a stranger; Stella Gofflight says—"

"What does she say?" demanded Nell, with a quick flash in the blue eyes.

"That Philips is paying court to you already; and that you like it."

"I am certainly flattered," the girl said, recklessly; "but I would not advise you to believe all you hear. It might be very unpleasant for Mr. Philips to have his name coupled with mine in such a fashion; and Stella is a mean sneak."

"For warning me against him!"

"No; for telling such awful lies; but if I were she I would not show the green-eyed monster quite so plainly. Why, I haven't exchanged a score of words with the man and I don't care if I never see him again. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for listening to, and repeating such gossip. Good-night Derrick Lovelace!"

"Oh, look here, Nell!" he exclaimed contritely,

"you are not going to leave me like that. I was a fool to be vexed by such idle words; but I couldn't help remembering that I am a poor man with my way to make, and he a rich fellow with nothing against him. Then you love pretty things; and I have been beastly miserable all day."

"I am very glad," the young lady responded with dignity. "You deserved to be; I thought between friends there should be perfect trust. You have doubted me, and so, before we quarrel, let us part. Again, good-night!"

"No, Nell, no! Was there ever a more wilful girl than you, I wonder? Every day of my life you torment me. Your chief delight is to make me wretched."

"Upon my word I am flattered by the portrait you draw of me; but why, if I am such a disagreeable young person, do you come here at all?"

"Because I love you! There, take the whole truth, Nell dear. I meant to go away in silence—I resolved not to speak until I had something to offer worth acceptance. I thought it would be fairer to you."

"You never looked at the question from my point of view," Nell said, in a very low voice. "Supposing I had cared for you, I might have dragged out years and years, uncertain of the nature of your regard for me! That was hardy

fair. Now, when another man (according to your distorted fancy) comes a-wooing, you suddenly wake to the knowledge that it is wiser to speak. What a pity you held your peace so long; and again she turned as though to leave him. Beside himself with love and doubt, he caught her by the arm,—

"Not too late—oh, Nell; don't say I am too late!"

"I like to be trusted; you hinted I was unfit for a poor man's wife. You said no end of disagreeable things; and—and I am glad you are leaving Guestland."

"That you may have more time to cultivate Philip's acquaintance! No, Nell I did not mean it; I am beside myself with love and jealousy. Stay, hear me out; at least you owe so much to a fellow who has given you his all."

She was obstinately silent so that he went on the more eagerly,—

"Ever since you were a child I have loved you; if I do not call you wife I never shall marry. I will work with all my might to get you a home pretty and sweet enough even for you. Oh! little darling, cannot you care for me? If you send me away without hope I shall not molest you any more, neither shall I go to the dogs. I have my mother still; and none but a coward will fall to the level of a beast even for his dear love's sake. Nell, is it to be good-by now and for ever?"

He had encircled her with his arm, she half reclined her golden head upon his shoulder as she whispered,—

"That must rest with you, Derrick!"

"Do you mean that you love me?" he cried, ecstatically.

"I think it looks like that," she answered, demurely; and then she felt herself caught close to his true heart, his lips pressed to hers, and, with a little sob of utter joy, she said,—

"What a goose you have been! Confess that you deserved the punishment I gave you."

"I am quite willing to plead guilty to being the biggest fool under the sun. Darling! darling! I cannot quite grasp yet the magnitude of my happiness."

"You will understand it better as the day for parting comes," said Nell, with a griefed droop of the pretty mouth; "we are not going to have all sunshine, and then, too, there is mother! I am afraid she will be angry."

"Not a doubt of it, for after all I am a poor match for the dearest girl in the county. Still, Mrs. Veribond does not dislike me and, I am quite a favourite with your father."

"Only—only mother's will is law. Oh, Derrick, I wish I could think and speak differently of her. It is said a bad daughter makes a bad wife; are not you afraid of the risk you run?"

"No," staunchly, "because, if you do not love Mrs. Veribond the fault is her own. To-morrow I shall come up to beg you of your people. After all they should be very grateful to me that I do not propose taking you away at once, and you will wait for me, Nell! even if it is a couple of years—"

"As long as you wish; I am 'ow're young to marry yet," smiling up at him, "and I must learn many things before I am a wife—I am so ignorant."

Then followed lover's talk, so inconsequent, so sweet, and it was not until Mrs. Veribond, who had driven up to the hall door, was heard calling sharply for Nell, that the girl tore herself away from her lover.

"What were you doing out there?" asked that lady; "it is quite dark now."

"I was saying good-bye to Derrick," answered Nell, passing hastily by; and, running through the broad hall, entered the common living room, which would have been a most pleasant apartment but for the stiff arrangement of the furniture, upon which Mrs. Veribond insisted.

"What rosy cheeks, Nell!" said her father glancing fondly up at her.

"They will be pale enough to-morrow," snapped his spouse, "for, of course, she will have a cold brought on by exposure to night air and dew. Never look for help from Nell but I am disappointed, and Veribond, I must say, I utterly dis-

approve of the great intimacy existing between your daughter and Derrick Lovelace."

"But, my dear Maria! I am sure he is as honest a young fellow as ever trod Guestland roads; and I always thought you liked him. Then, just because Nell wears long frocks now, why should she be separated from her life-long friend and companion? Why, where is Nell?" looking round to find the girl flown.

"Gone to gossip with Phoebe in the kitchen, I suppose," dabbling viciously with her needle at the sock she had picked up, "and you must be blind not to see Derrick would marry her to-morrow if he could."

"I'm sure I wish it were possible," sighed the husband, "at least she would have a happy and peaceful home."

She took no notice of this reflection upon herself, being engrossed with one thought only. Leaning forward she remarked,—

"Nell is not fit to be a poor man's partner; have you never thought that with her face and her education she might do much better than accept Derrick? How blind you are! Must I tell you why Mr. Philips comes here so frequently?"

He laughed outright.

"He comes to see me of course; what bee have you got in your bonnet, Maria? And even if your suspicions have some foundation, Nell is too good and true a girl to marry a man for his money."

Here Phoebe, entering with the supper tray, put an end to the discussion, which was not resumed, and on the morrow Derrick presented himself at the house at such a time as Mr. Veribond would be lunching.

In a quiet manly fashion he told his story, asking that he and Nell might be formally engaged, stating his prospects briefly, but adding with an ingenuous blush,—

"And I am sure I could make her happy; we only want each other. I love her with all my soul, I will work for her with all my strength."

"Yes lad, yes," cried the corn merchant, gripping the extended hand, cordially, "and there is no one I would so like my girl to wed. You say she loves you—well then, we have only to hear what her mother thinks on the subject, and if all goes well, you shall have her."

In some trepidation he called his wife to join them, and Derrick's heart beat most uncomfortably, because he felt instinctively he had rather an obstacle than a help in Mrs. Veribond. She favoured him with a curt good-morning, as she entered, then stood with folded hands, tightly locked lips, and erect figure listening to her husband's hesitating speech.

When he had finished, she said,

"From your rambling statement I am to understand Derrick Lovelace wants to marry Nell. I told you so, but you laughed at me—well, the thing is impossible."

"But why?" demanded Derrick, flushing. "I am of rather more than respectable birth, and my prospects are good. Then I don't ask you to give Nell to me yet—in a couple of years I shall have made great advance."

"Do not count your chickens before they are hatched, young man. Let me remind you, too, that your birth is not a marketable commodity, that you must supplement your mother's slender annuity, so that little of your income would be left for Nell, and she has extravagant tastes. On the face of it the whole thing is absurd."

"But if you think it so, if you knew I loved Nell, why did you allow us to be so much together? You might have guessed the result, madam."

"Look here, Maria, I will speak my mind for once. Derrick and my girl seem made for each other, and he is not so unreasonable that he wishes to marry her straight off—that is where he shows sense, he is quite willing to wait until he has made his mark."

"Yes; then he will suddenly find Nell has grown older and less pretty, and will jilt her for a younger rival. Oh! I know what long engagements are and how they terminate (she had bought her experience dearly, having been jilted after a six-year-long betrothal) and I will not consent to such an arrangement." She paused,

looked down frowningly upon the ground, and each man respected her silence, hoping that if left to herself she would relent.

Suddenly she spoke, without lifting her eyes.

"I do not wish to appear harsh, although you are good enough to believe me so, but I want to assure myself of Nell's welfare; I have always liked you Derrick Lovelace, and if your prospects were brighter, should make no conditions with you. I refuse, however, to sanction an engagement, Nell is not to be bound to you, or you to her. You may correspond fortnightly, and if at the end of two years you have realised your dreams, you may claim her openly; but long before then both you and she will have repented your folly, and wearied of each other."

CHAPTER III.

VAINLY they tried to combat her resolution; she was unmovable, and finally, Mr. Veribond, slapping Derrick upon the shoulder, said cheerfully,—

"Well, lad, you've no cause for complaint so far; I've come round to the wife's way of thought (long years had taught him this was wisest) and it is fairer both to you and Nell; both start unhindered, and if you really love one another, you will not change in two, or yet twenty years. Take the gifts the gods send and be grateful."

"But, sir, Nell belongs no more to me than to any other, than she did before."

"That is the beauty of the arrangement. If she is constant, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that, although not bound to you, she preferred you to all others," said Mrs. Veribond, with a peculiar smile, as she turned away. In the hall she, rubbing her hands together with satisfaction, said,—

"That clears the deck for action; it is a good move, and in two years one can do wonders." This thought was so pleasant to her that she was even kindly towards Phoebe, much to that damsel's amazement.

And now the last night of Derrick's stay at Guestland arrived. Mrs. Veribond had graciously permitted the lovers to spend the evening alone, Derrick would not be returning for at least twelve months, so there could be no harm in humouring the "young idiots;" indeed, in this case it might be wise to grant them some indulgence, "and after to-night," thought the lady, "she shall learn to forget. Fortunately, Lester Philips is good-looking, and suit a young man—girl's hearts are so influenced by their eyes."

Down by the garden gate, where now the clematis hung only in grey woolly clusters, like to a judge's wig, Nell half reclined on Derrick's breast, her hands clasped behind his neck, her pretty face all stained and marred by tears.

"It is so much harder than I thought to say good-by," she sobbed. "Oh, I wish I did not love you quite so well—no!—no!—I don't mean that—only, only, if you need not go away."

"It is all for the best, sweetheart," he said bravely, although his heart was protesting all the while against their separation, "and we shall have each others letters. As we may not write often we must make them long, keep them in the form of a diary; oh, sweetheart! Oh, we have much for which to be thankful. But Nell, my darling little Nell, if only I could take you with me, what a happy man I should be."

She sighed as she clung about him, thinking perhaps her lot was harder than his, because he would move in the busy world and have so little time in which to be wretched, whilst all day and every day she would be within reach of her mother's scolding voice, her mother's unkind looks.

Oh! if only she were more like gentle Mrs. Lovelace, and as she thought Derrick said,—

"You will go often to the cottage, Nell; my mother loves you as much for your own sake as for mine. Now heart of my heart, the moment for good-bye has come, and how to say it? Nell, let us make the parting brief."

She stayed her tears then, and with her true eyes meeting his full of pain which shone through all their tenderness, she said,—

"Heaven bless and keep you always, heaven send us joy;" and kissing him once upon the mouth, broke into piteous sobs.

He had no words with which to comfort her, his own heart was heavy as lead, his manhood all but failed him; but he strained her close as he kissed her not once but many times, and although the next moment she stood alone, she lingered, listening to his retreating steps, until far away in the distance she heard the faint echo of his farewell, and weeping sorely, whispered,—
"Goodbye! goodbye! oh, come back to me soon!"

It was well that her mother was always near, for she allowed the girl no time for brooding; indeed filled her days so entirely that there were many times when Nell had barely leisure to write a few lines in her innocent diary for Derrick's delectation; and her visits to Mrs. Lovelace, who lived at the extreme end of the village were few and far between.

But she was terribly troubled by the constant calls Mr. Lester Philips made at the house. She could but feel she was the magnet which drew him there, and that her mother smiled approval on his suit.

But she did not guess the pretty new gowns Mrs. Veribond ordered were simply to be adjuncts to her beauty, to draw this man nearer and nearer yet.

She liked him, but the very fear that he should construe her liking into love, made her manner towards him shy and cold.

It was in early November that Stella Golightly paid her a visit; she was a tall slender girl, rather pretty than otherwise, but her face was spoiled by self-consciousness, and her affection marred both her manner and her bearing. Advancing uninvited to Nell, she, stooping, impressed a kiss (or rather a peck) upon the velvet cheek; then sinking into a chair said,—

"It is such ages since I saw you to have a comfortable gossip, that I felt I must run over. By the way, how do you like Mr. Philips on closer acquaintance?"

"He improves," said Nell carelessly, "he would be nicer still if he were married."

"Rumour has it, he will be soon," remarked Stella with a keen glance at her companion, "and that the bride-elect is a Guestland lady."

"Am I to congratulate you?" asked Nell, slyly, "there isn't much choice here even among the fair sex; I suppose you and I are the only girls in our class!"

She was startled by the look on Stella's face. "Folks say it is you," dropped from her pale lips, "is it true? Mrs. Lovelace half confesses you are engaged to Derrick, and—you were always together. Oh Nell, if you really mean to marry him, why will you try to win Mr. Philips! No—no—I am not sentimental—I don't care for him—but I would do my best to make him happy. I am so sick of pretences, of petty shifts—our whole household is a sham—and if I could break away from my surroundings, I would marry the first man who could provide me with a decent home, a comfortable income."

"No, dear Stella, no," cried Nell, moved to pity, and crossing she knelt by the other's side, her sweet face fairer than ever in the flickering firelight. "You do not mean that. Never—never marry a man you do not love; remember it is a life-long bargain—when once it is made it must be kept, although it breaks your heart to keep it. Wait awhile; wait—until Prince Charming comes, and then you will be glad you did nothing rashly."

"It is very well for you to talk of a Prince Charming," said Stella, resting her chin in her hollowed palm, and staring gloomily into the glowing depths of the fire. "You have Derrick, and he is bound to make his way. But people say that you are off with the old love, soon to be on with the new."

"Then they lie," cried Nell, who was a creature of many moods, "mother would not hear of an engagement between us yet, she said I was too young—but that is nonsense—still, if Derrick comes back in two years, or in twenty, he will find me waiting for him still. We love each other, and oh, Stella, love is enough."

Miss Golightly had learned all she wished to know, and now she rose.

"I must be going home; papa never takes tea unless I make it, and I always have to toast his muffins—in company we pose as the devoted parent, the dutiful, affectionate daughter—He carries the farce on even when we are alone. But I know him as he is: selfish, despicable, a sycophant, and a hypocrite—there, not another word; I have been a fool to speak so plainly, only I feel I may trust you, that no word I speak in haste will ever be repeated by you. Sometimes I envy, and then I despise you—envy you for your loyal, guileless nature, despise you because you are so meek, so easily cheated."

"Meek!" said Nell, "why this is a new song; almost everybody says I am the reverse."

Miss Golightly smiled mysteriously; then taking her friend's face between her hands, kissed her upon each cheek, after the foreign fashion she affected.

"You are a dear little soul Nell, and I will keep your secret inviolate."

Yet as she went homewards, meeting Lester Philips by the way, the one thought present with her was how to oust her rival from her place. She told him she had just left Nell. The eager look in his eyes filled her heart with envy; but she went on glibly,—

"She has imparted a secret to me, and I am dying to tell it to some one. Why not you?"

"If it is a secret," Lester said, gravely, "respect it Miss Golightly."

"But suppose that Nell wishes it known?"

"I am the first to fall into command," he answered, smiling down at her.

"Well, Nell Veribond is in love, to use an old phrase, 'with a true and proper gentleman,' who has the admirable sense to prefer her above all the world."

The good-looking, fair face flushed, his eyes were full of anxious questioning.

"Do I know him, this most fortunate of men?" he asked quickly.

"I think so; he is Derrick Lovelace, the young engineer. They have been sweethearts ever since they were boy and girl together; but Mrs. Veribond is resolved that no engagement shall be announced until Derrick has made his mark."

She glanced at him from under heavy white lids, saw that his face was ashen, that he must moisten his lips before he could speak, and went on easily,—

"You must not divulge what I have told; but I am sure you wish these young people happiness, and hope their time of probation may be short—here is home—won't you come in? No! Well, we shall hope to see you soon, dad and I; we are very lonely people."

As she walked up the gravel path to the house a look of triumph was in her brown eyes.

"He is an honourable man. I don't think he will go there often now," she thought, "really I feel quite like a benevolent spirit. I have saved Lester Philips from making a fool of himself, have spared Nell much misery, done Derrick a good turn; and now if father does not spoil everything by his folly I may win the game!"

Mrs. Veribond was considerably surprised the next morning when Lester entered the kitchen, where she was alone and busy. He looked stormy but resolute, as sitting down upon the edge of the table he said,—

"Will you answer me one question truly, madam! Is your daughter engaged to Lovelace?"

She dropped her spoon as she turned with astonishment upon him; then she said, very quietly,—

"What reason have you to ask me such a question?"

"No reason, perhaps, but certainly a right; the right that love gives."

"Some one has been telling you idle stories," she answered stoutly, although her heart was beating with triumph. "Nell is not engaged to Derrick, and never will be with my consent; but from childhood they have been much together. It seemed absurd to put any veto on their friendship now, although I believe young Lovelace has some foolish idea that to ask is to have. Mr. Philips, you do not quite show your wisdom when you listen to interested parties."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, "what would you infer, Mrs. Veribond?"

"That Stella Golightly has been drawing a little on her imagination; and that she is anxious herself to be settled. Why, everybody knows that Dr. Golightly has next to nothing to call his own, and Stella was always jealous of my child."

He was silent a little while; then he said in a manly, earnest way,—

"I am over old I fear for Nell; but I love her truly, and I would win her if I could; but I do not want the loss of her love, neither will I take a wife who values me according to my possessions; but if she is free, and you will give me permission to win her—if indeed that is possible—I will leave no duty undone to accomplish my purpose."

"She had a girlish fancy for Derrick, but it is over. We are not rich people—I would like to see her well settled before I die—I wish you success."

CHAPTER IV.

It was Christmas Day, and Nell, as she walked home from church alone, could not help wishing Derrick were with her. She had been very unhappy of late, enduring much persecution from her mother, listening with burning cheeks and indignant heart to her slighting references to Derrick and his prospects.

Then, too, Lester was always at the house, and although he had not as yet declared himself she felt such a declaration was inevitable and must come soon.

She knew that the villagers doubted her faith, that even gentle Mrs. Lovelace regarded her with less of tenderness and more of suspicion; and oh! what would Derrick think or do if these idle rumours should reach him!

In the midst of her anxious musings a voice behind her said,—

"Good-morning, Miss Veribond, and a happy Christmas to you!"

She was vexed then that she had chosen the path across the fields for her homeward way (it was so deserted at this season of the year) and the face which met Lester's regard was both troubled and annoyed.

"I am not a very welcome companion I fear," he said, half wistfully, "if you tell me to go I will go, but it is lonely up at The Hall."

Nell was a friendly little soul, and now, sorry for her ungracious greeting, she made haste to say,—

"There is no reason why you should not use this way because I choose to take it; I prefer it because it is shorter and quieter."

"I have noticed," he said, adapting his long stride to her short steps, "that you are almost always alone. Have not you any friends?"

"Only Stella Golightly, and I don't think you would quite call us friends. Stella is pretty and pleasant, but I am afraid I am rather exacting; I want the whole affection of a friend, not the fiftieth part of it; and when it is divided amongst so many there cannot be much left for the one. It is only sufficient to tickle one's palate."

He laughed outright then, thinking her words were peculiar to herself, and chatting in most cordial fashion they reached her home.

Mr. Veribond came out to meet them, and Mrs. Veribond, looking rather more genial than usual, urged Lester to share the mid-day meal with them, waiving all ceremony.

He did not need much persuasion, the thought of the solitary lunch amidst the splendour of cut glass and silver was repugnant to him. So presently they were all seated, a merry party, around the table groaning with its abundance of good things; and Lester confessed he was not a little sorry he had promised to dine with the Golightlys that evening, as he infinitely preferred his present quarters.

"We, too, are sorry," said the hostess, briskly; "but we must not keep you, as the Golightlys are dining late in your honour; usually they live as we do—as all the middle class folks in Guestland do—and, having dispatched this shot at her near and dear friends, she smiled benignly as one who has done her duty."

After dinner Mr. Veribond retired to his own particular sanctum for his usual siesta, and his wife went away to give all necessary instructions to Phoebe with regard to tea and to array herself in her best black silk gown which was Stella's envy on account of its beauty and value.

By this arrangement Nell and Lester were left alone, a state of matters he ardently desired, and she as devoutly loathed.

They chatted of indifferent things in a desultory fashion until the light began to fade; and Nell rising, said nervously, she must go in search of her mother.

Lester laid his hand quickly upon her arm, exclaiming,—

"Don't go yet, Nell, I have something to tell you."

She sank back in her chair, thinking,—
"It is coming; better meet and get it all over; it would be kinder to him."

Then, like one in a dream, she heard him ask,—

"Nell, is this happy afternoon to be the forerunner of many others? Dear, your mother has assured me you are free to be won, that in your affection I need fear no rival, and so I will speak. Little sweetheart, what will you say to me?"

"That I am sorry, most sorry," she cried, tears of pity and indignation filling her eyes. "I did not want you to love me, I hate to think I must make you miserable—mother should not so have misled you—I am not free."

Her words came upon him like a blow; he was dazed, staggered, whilst Nell sat trembling listening to his deep-drawn breaths, and longing for some interruption. If only he would speak! This silence was so awful.

And now a hoarse laboured voice broke the heavy stillness.

"Who is it that lies to me! Your mother assured me you were not engaged, that I had no need to be jealous of Derrick Lovelace—you declare that you are bound. By the affection I bear you tell me the truth, be open with me."

"I will, indeed I will. Derrick and I love each other, though mother pretends to laugh at us and will not sanction a public engagement until Derrick's prospects are better—but I am content to wait."

She spoke so simply so naturally he could not doubt her, but with a groan he said,—

"Nell, Nell! this is indeed bitter news to me. Oh, little darling, I have all along been hoping against hope, believing in time my love would break down every barrier you raised between us, the more shy and cold you were, the more persistently and passionately I sought and adored you—have you the heart to take all hope from me?"

"I must," she answered with a little sob, "it would be cruel and wicked to reply in other fashion to you; because as I love Derrick he loves me."

"But he is so very young, and men are given to change; it is not often a first attachment is lasting—you, yourself, may find later that he falls short of your imaginings, may even wish to be free."

She shook her head half-smiling through her tears.

"That can never be; but if ever Derrick is false to me (and he is truth itself) and you still should wish it, I will marry you."

"You mean that?" he asked, quickly, taking the half-jest in sober earnest. She was startled, but answered steadily,—

"Yes, on my honour; but do not let this thought encourage hope—for he cannot be false."

Lester rose; taking both the little hands in his he looked earnestly into her sweet face.

"If you could have loved me I would have died to make you glad," he said, slowly and gravely, "oh, child, what will life be to me without you! I was a happier man when I toiled alone and had hard work at times to pay my way; but I won't despair, something tells me I shall win you yet, and on that thought I shall live. I would not do myself dishonour by endeavouring to supplant or work evil to my rival—only promise me, Nell, if ever you are free you will write me just one word, 'Come.'"

"I promise," she said, thinking pitifully what

a wasted life his would be if he spent it waiting for such a message; and then, before she was aware of his intention, he stooping, kissed her once upon the brow with tender reverence, and so was gone. Then she did a very womanly thing. Covering her pretty eyes with her hands, she cried heartily to think of the sorrow she so unwittingly had wrought. Half an hour later Mrs. Veribond rustled in,—

"Where is Mr. Phillips?" she said, after a quick glance round the room.

"He has gone, mother," answered Nell, in a meek voice.

"Gone! He promised to stay for tea. What have you been doing, Nell?"

"Telling him the truth; he ought to have known it long ago. Oh, how could you so cruelly treat him. He is so kind and generous, so honest himself I wonder you had the heart to deceive him so grossly. He asked me to marry him, and I showed him how impossible that would be so long as I have Derrick—I wanted to tell him I had always loved my sweetheart, that I always should; but—but the words choked me when I saw his white, pained face."

"You are a fool," cried her mother, "no other girl having such a chance of settlement would throw it away for the sake of a beggarly lad, who long before he can marry will have wearied of his first love. You have only youth and comeliness for a dowry, when they are gone what is to become of you?"

"I shall still have Derrick," steadily; "and, mother, nothing will make me break faith with him. I am quite content to take him as he is, and I would rather share his poverty than another man's wealth."

In a paroxysm of rage the waspish little woman struck her across one soft cheek, leaving the scarlet marks of her cruel fingers there, Nell's eyes blazed with sudden passion, but not one word did she utter, and Mrs. Veribond rushed off to rouse her husband from his slumber, and confide all her wrongs and troubles to him.

He answered sleepily,—

"Let the child alone, Maria; Derrick is a good fellow, and I don't want our lass spoiled."

"But think of the chance," she almost screamed, "she will never get another like it; and you do not come of a long-lived family. If you were to die Nell would be penniless and helpless."

"I shall not die these fifty years to come," he roared, starting up, "although, no doubt, you wish me gone; you've never wasted much love upon me, and you've had your own way always; but in this one thing my will shall be law. Nell loves her lad and she shall marry him if she will."

Mrs. Veribond smiled scornfully.

"I don't allow anyone to usurp my authority and you will soon dance to another tune."

Alas! alas! it was even so. Good-hearted, generous to a fault, resolute in words and deeds when abroad, he was a mere cypher in his own home. By dint of scolding and perpetual nagging (she never tried persuasion) by sundry well-acted fainting fits, Mrs. Veribond, in the course of a fortnight, had reduced her lord to submission. Against his heart, against his better judgment, he one day said to Nell,—

"Look here my lass, your mother and I think any understanding between you and Derrick Lovelace absurd; you must drop all correspondence for a time at least. If he is worthy you, he will stand the test of silence; but, Nell, I am inclined to think you would be wiser to listen to Mr. Phillips."

The blue eyes met his steadily, it seemed to him scorn lay lurking in their depths; then the girl said lowly,—

"You are not speaking after your own heart, dad; mother has been talking to you, until you see through her eyes, and think with her."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, all the more angry because she spoke the truth and had read his weakness aright; "have I no opinions of my own, miss! How dare you set yourself up against my lawful authority, or refuse to marry the suitor I have chosen?"

"Father, dear father, be your own good, kind self; I am so unhappy! Even Derrick's mother

thinks badly of me because I may never visit her—only she does not know this—oh, do not join with mother to break my heart!"

But he, thrusting her roughly away, bade her go to her room, and, in silence, she obeyed. But his conscience smote him sorely, he loved his child dearly, so that brooding over matters he almost cursed his wife, and being unable to rest, stole up to Nell's chamber. Listening outside he heard her sob,—

"Oh Derrick! Derrick! come back to me, I am so wretched, and there is none to speak a good word for you."

Then he opened the door and the next moment had his child in his arms, was entreating her not to vex herself or grieve him with her tears, promising she should marry Derrick or any one else she chose, if only she would be his own happy little Nell again. Listening, she dried her tears, smiling affectionately up at him, although in her heart she knew that he would go over to the enemy's side when his anger had cooled. If she had loved him less dearly she would have despised him for his weakness.

The next day Stella Golightly spent with the Veribonds, because the doctor had gone to town, and she added secretly to Nell,—

"He will bring you news of Derrick for he intends to call on him at his lodgings."

CHAPTER V.

"Mrs. VERIBOND! Madam!" cried the doctor, as, three days later, he was driving homewards, and the lady turned peevishly to meet him. She dispised him as a gossip and a hypocrite, and was very rarely at pains to hide her feelings from any. But she was tired, too, and Golightly would pass her house, he might give her a lift so far, and this was just the very thing he offered.

"Jump up," he said, effusively, "you look fatigued, we are not so young as we used to be, Mrs. Veribond, though we don't care to publish the fact upon the house-tops; folks find it out soon enough without that. And how is my favourite little Nell? If I had not so fair a daughter to grace my humble home I should envy you your possession, and that is a positive fact."

"Nell is quite well," answered her mother drawing the rug closer about her, "and how have you enjoyed your holiday?"

"Immensely, my dear madam, immensely. I looked up several of my old friends and we had such glorious gossip about the times when we were 'boys, merry, merry boys, together,' such a long way back it seemed, (with a sentimental sigh), and then I called on young Lovelace."

"Indeed," frostily, "I hope you found him well."

"Well and happy, madam. Ah! what a sly dog! what a sly dog," and he began to chuckle. "How easy it is to win a reputation for virtue."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, quickly, "speak out; I hate hints."

"But you must promise to tell little Nell nothing, jealousy plays the deuce with girls, and he assured me there was nothing in it. As I said I called on him and just as I reached the foot of his staircase, he came down with a young and remarkably pretty woman. I think they had been quarrelling because traces of tears were on her cheeks, and Master Derrick did not seem in the best of moods. When he saw me he turned green with astonishment and anger; but I called him aside to assure him no harm was done, that I would not divulge the story, when he flashed like a bully upon me, called me an old fool, and bade me keep my scurrilous tongue to myself. Now, you know very well what a horror I have of scandal—dear I dear!" glancing ally at her darkening face. "I hope I have not said anything to vex you. Young men will be young men, and Derrick assured me that his regard for little Nell was unaltered."

"Very likely; men are always good at protesting. No, indeed I am not angry, and, thank you very much for setting me down at my own door; my love to Stella, and good-bye."

She went swiftly towards the house and as the doctor drove off he chuckled maliciously.

"Many a nasty stab has madam given me, and I'll warrant my words were gall and wormwood to her; she is so proud of herself and her belongings that she cannot tolerate the least slight—and I told me so."

Full of self-gratulation he reached home, and over the dinner table began to regale Stella with his morning's work, when suddenly she flashed on him with the question,—

"Are you quite mad? Don't you see that you are doing your best to ruin your own plans and spoil my prospects?"

"My dear! my dear! really, this is undutiful, and unpardonable language," he said, weakly, "what have I done amiss now? Somehow, I never please you."

"Please me!" scornfully, "you disgust me! Don't you know that Mrs. Veribond would give her ears to see Nell Lester Philip's wife? Don't you realise that you have shown her the way to accomplish her ends? Nell loves Derrick; but she is the last girl in the world to share his heart with a rival, and, if properly played upon, she will marry Lester to prove she cares nothing for him. For my own part, I don't believe Derrick could be false, but it is easy to jump to conclusions—only I wish I had a better, wiser, cleverer, *à-dé-camp* than you;" and with a contemptuous gesture she flung out of the room. But when three days had passed, bringing her no tidings of a broken engagement, she hoped that Mrs. Veribond had treated her father's communications with her usual contempt. But that lady patiently bided her time; she would do nothing rashly, she had little faith in Dr. Golightly, and did not intend to act upon his information alone. On the fourth morning, however, she had fully resolved what to do, having well digested the facts before her; so, very calmly, she announced her intention of going to town on business. No one gainsaid her, though Mr. Veribond remarked, jocosely, that,—

"All Guestland was bent on gadding, since old Golightly returned with his extraordinary yarns."

His wife snuffed contemptuously, and went on with her breakfast, whilst Nell felt ashamed of the thrill of relief which the mere idea of her mother's absence gave her.

It was a long journey from Guestland to London, and Mrs. Veribond did not reach Liverpool-street until three p.m., then, having haggled with a cabman over the fare, she drove to Derrick's lodgings, which were in a little street opening from Fleet-street.

A comely young woman answered her imperious rap, and directed her to Mr. Lovelace's rooms, saying he was in.

Upstairs went the irate lady, and knocked for admission; then came the sound of scuffling, the closing of a door, and next Derrick appeared flushed and anxious.

At sight of her he looked more than ever perplexed; and she, catching sight of a woman's figure, thrust her way in, saying,—

"You are not very hospitable, will not you ask me to be seated when I have come all these miles to see you? I and who is this woman?"

A lovely girlish face was turned upon her; a sweet voice said,—

"Mr. Lovelace is my dear friend; he will tell you who and what I am, madam."

"No," said Derrick, "before I open my lips upon such a subject I must learn the reason for your intrusion, Mrs. Veribond."

"Will you hear it before her?" pointing a contemptuous finger at the girl. "Briedy, then, I come to prove the report Dr. Golightly has made."

"The meddling old fool! He deserves to be ducked; and, madam, I must say I think you did wrong to listen to his tales, he is a veritable *Manchhausen*."

"You will not put me off like that, Derrick Lovelace; you are engaged (conditionally, it is true) to my daughter, then I ask you again, *who and what is this woman?*"

The girl rising in greatest agitation, cried,—

"Oh, please tell her all; she is very dreadful—send her away—for my sake; I have borne all I can."

"No, Mamie; she has chosen to insult you;

and I will not enlighten her; let her apologise to you, and withdraw her beastly accusation against me, and then it will be time to talk matters over calmly. Mrs. Veribond, it is true I am engaged to Nell, but not even for her sake would I desert this lady, and I am certain your daughter would not wish it."

"Shall I return to tell her you have found another fairer than she?"

"As you will; Nell knows me, and will trust me to the end."

"That is your answer; I will carry it faithfully to her; I will tell her, too, that her rival is her exact antipode—dark, tall, *distingue*—*she will not be jealous!* I wish your new love joy of you, you shall hear from Miss Veribond tomorrow."

"I shall be glad," rejoined Derrick, coolly, "but don't paint me blacker than I am," and his smile was not quite pleasant to see.

In a towering rage Mrs. Veribond went downstairs, meeting the buxom young woman on her way.

"Who is that girl I found with Mr. Lovelace?" she asked.

"His sweetheart, I suppose," rejoined the other, "but I don't go poking my nose into folks' secrets; it is quite enough for me to draw their rents."

"You are the landlady, I suppose? Don't you think you ought to—"

"Mind my own business, ma'am? well, that's just what I do, and I'd advise you to do the same. From the look of you, ma'am, you come from the country, and it won't do you any harm to take a word of advice from a Londoner born and bred—it's just as well not to put on too much 'side' here, because if you are a great gun in your own village, you'd be nothing but a toy pistol here," and, burning with wrath, Mrs. Veribond stayed to hear no more.

She rushed into the street, hailing a cab, whilst from an upper window, Derrick watching her smiled, saying,—

"She won't have the power to turn Nell's heart against me."

"Oh, but she is very dreadful!" began the dark-eyed girl, trembling in every limb, then another voice from the inner room broke out,—

"I say, Lovelace, has she gone? What a terrible old woman. But is it quite impossible to tell her the truth?"

"Quite; but she cannot harm me. Nell would never distrust me, because she is true as steel herself. I am only troubled to think what a life she will lead my poor girl. Now, really, Stanstead, you must keep yourself hidden; my landlady is our staunch friend, but in the case of sudden surprises, like that Mrs. Veribond sprang upon us, things might be awkward."

"Oh, well, we won't look on the dark side of affairs. Mamie shall make us some tea, and we'll all be as jolly as sandboys together."

Derrick tried to enter into his friend's mood, but a sense of coming trouble was upon him, so that he was glad when Mamie took her leave and Stanstead retired to the inner chamber.

He had work to do but could not do it; and as the evening wore by he went out to roam through the streets—restless, discomposed, unhappy.

Towards midnight he returned to his lodging; and being very weary, fell asleep, never waking until the February sun was shining in his windows.

He dressed leisurely, and entering his sitting-room, found two letters beside his plate, the one from Mr. Veribond, condemning him in no measured terms, the other from Nell.

She would have nothing harsh to say, he thought; and never for an instant did he believe her capable of jealousy or distrust of him.

Yet his heart sank when he saw what a tiny letter it was, and his cheeks paled, then flushed through all their bronze as he mastered its contents. Thus Nell wrote:

"You have deceived and duped me; you have broken my faith and my heart; if she whom you call Mamie can make you happy, I will try not to complain. But I wish with all my heart I had died before I learned your duplicity. Do not trouble to reply—forget me as quickly as you

have forgotten your love—do not reproach your self. I, too, shall forget."

He flung the poor little note aside in a tempest of anger.

"She would be rid of me," he muttered, striding to and fro, "Golightly said Philips is always hovering near her; my own mother has lost faith in her; well let her go—it is like a woman to fling the blame upon me."

So in anger he wrote,—

"DEAR MISS VERIBOND,—

"I thank you for anticipating my wishes. It is evident we never were suited to each other; and, doubtless, we shall be happier apart. I am grateful to Golightly and Mrs. Veribond for the extreme interest they have manifested in me and my affairs, and hope at some future date to thank them adequately."

"One thing is very certain, that having lost confidence in me, you have acted wisely in casting me off; the woman I call wife must trust me all in all, and this you have not done—a richer man might have received a more merciful sentence; for riches cover a multitude of sins."

"DERRICK LOVELACE."

When he had despatched that cruel letter he would have given worlds to recall it; his heart grew pitiful to little Nell, as he thought of her mother's harshness, the daily persecution she must have endured before she could have been brought to release him, or taught to believe him false. If he could have seen her in her anguish and despair his generous heart would have melted with pity.

With his letter clutched in her hand, she lay prone upon the floor, moaning,—

"Oh, Derrick! oh, my love! my love! Even this sin against me I could forgive, if only you would send me one kind word—but now! now! oh, you must never guess how I grieve."

CHAPTER VI.

For two or three days Nell went about like a ghost, and her father dared only show his pity and affection in those few odd moments when they were alone.

Her mother lost no opportunity to twit her with her folly, and to urge her acceptance of Lester to prove she had sustained no serious wound.

Nell held out bravely enough for awhile; but home was so wretched, she longed for peace; surely it would be better to marry the man who loved her, than remain in the midst of such strife. It was hard indeed "to live forgotten and die forlorn;" at least as Lester's wife she would be sure of kindness.

And thinking thus she seated herself at her desk; her face was white as the snowdrops in the garden beyond, and from out of it her blue eyes gleamed with a strange fire. Her lips were fast set, but she neither trembled nor moaned now; she was past all outward show of emotion. On the paper before her she wrote the one word "Come," and giving herself no time for thought at once despatched it by the office-boy to the Hall. Then she went to her mother, who was deep in the mysteries of cooking.

"Idling again," she said tartly, casting a swift look at the girl's white face and heavy eyes, "a nice wife you will make some poor man."

"I don't intend to marry a poor man," Nell answered coldly, "Love is all very nice in theory, but it won't wear well. Neither do I propose working this morning, because I expect Mr. Philips will presently call."

Mrs. Veribond caught her breath.

"Why, Nell, have you done it? I am glad you have come to your senses, though why you could not see with my eyes before will always remain a mystery to me."

She would have kissed her, but the girl drew back.

"No," she said in the same odd, cold way, "don't try to sanctify my sin with an embrace. Mother, you have lost your daughter, the old Nell is gone never to return again. You drove

her away. "If you had been kind to me in my grief I should have been grateful—but you rejoiced to find *him* false; you have never ceased to reproach me for my 'infatuation,' you have made home a terrible place to me, and if I marry Lester Phillips I marry him to escape your tyranny, and to win rest."

Never in her life had Mrs. Veribond listened to such plain speaking; coming from Nell it had two-fold force, because though unhappily the girl could not love her, she had always been docile and respectful. Now she had broken her bonds, and as she went away, she said,—

"I will try to forgive you when the memory of your cruelty is less keen. You should have been my best friend, but you are my bitterest foe," and Mrs. Veribond stared at her retreating figure in speechless amazement and futile anger. No, she could never hurt Nell any more, she had killed every vestige of natural affection, had alienated the gentle, generous heart from herself for all time.

Lester replied in person to Nell's summons; but though from her window she saw him coming she made no attempt at adornment; if he would have her he must take her as she was, for herself and herself alone. Slowly she went downstairs to meet him, whilst over a hand seemed plucking her back, and a voice cried in her heart "Forbear! Forbear!" but she went on unheeding, and slowly opening the door stood face to face with Lester. He was almost as white as she, but there was a great rapture in his eyes, which made her grow sick with the knowledge that he loved her more than she desired or deserved.

"You sent for me," he said, in a curiously strained voice, "and I have come. Now you must tell me what your message meant."

Her breath came quickly from between her parted lips, her colour rose then faded; her eyes drooped before his ardent, eager gaze; her voice was low but steady as she answered,—

"Once you told me that if I ever were free, and I wrote you 'come,' you would give me the love and allegiance I once rejected. Well, I am free—the man I trusted, the man I said could not be false has jilted me."

"Well!" he made a forward movement as though to catch her close to him, but she waved him back.

"Stop, you must hear me out. Derrick no longer loves me; strange, is it not, how quickly men forget? And you will think too that he is nothing to me; but you must not so deceive yourself. I am trying hard to blot him out of my memory; but," drearily, "I do not promise you that I shall succeed. Only life here is so hard; I am sick of harshness, of loneliness. I do not love you although I like you very much, and if you still wish to call me wife, you shall not repent your choice."

"If I wish it! Oh, my darling, is not that my soul's desire!" and now his pent-up passion would have way. Drawing her into a close embrace he kissed the white sweet face many times ere he said, "Well, sweetheart, wife that is to be, you have made me a very happy man. Kiss me, dear heart."

She shivered, a moment hesitated, then saying,—

"Why not? I belong to you now," lightly touched his cheek with her cold lips, thinking all the while of Derrick—Derrick her bonny boy lover, her faithless, heartless swain.

"I shall never be at rest until you are really mine," whispered Lester. "I shall always be expecting some untoward chance may wrest you from me; so Nell, when shall it be? The gladdest day in all my life!"

"Let it be soon," she cried, passionately, "let it repent. And oh, Lester, take me away, take me away! I shall go mad if I remain long with mother. Don't blame her; I think she means well; but—but—I cannot bear her scoffs and floutings—and, indeed, I will try not to disappoint you."

"You could not if you would; it is enough for me now, to know that you belong to me, in time I shall win your heart, and as there is no good and sufficient reason for delay we will be

married this day three weeks, and Heaven knows I will do my best to make you happy."

She hid her face on his breast, weeping silent, bitter tears.

Mrs. Veribond lost no time in publishing Nell's engagement, and amongst the first to hear of it was Stella Golightly. Her face grew curiously pale, her eyes flashed angrily; none knew so well as she what good reason she had for wishing to be settled, or with what horror she viewed the darkening future. With a disdainful look she said,—

"After all, Nell is no better than the rest of us; she loves Derrick, but she loves Lester Philip's gold more. I would not have made such an exchange."

"Opportunity is a fine thing," remarked Mrs. Veribond, tersely, "and I always thought you were particularly enamoured of Mr. Philips; it was common report, though of course rumour is but a liar at the best. Still, Stella Golightly, it would be just as well if you did not show quite so plainly how sour the grapes are."

Burning with rage the girl went at once to call on Mrs. Lovelace to impart her news. The gentle invalid listened with flushing cheeks, and a sudden sense of indignation filling her heart; and when Stella had made an end of the story, she said,—

"This will all but break my boy's heart; he loves her so truly, he thought no other woman worthy to stand beside her, and now she has thrown him over for love of gold. She is a wicked, worthless girl, and deserves all the unhappiness that may fall to her share. My poor boy! My poor boy!"

Stella did not stay to console with her, but with a hasty good-bye left her to walk quickly, feverishly home.

"It is father who has precipitated matters," she thought, angrily. "Why should I be plagued with such a marplot? And Nell, the little hypocrite—did she not say nothing should make her false to Derrick, or induce her to marry Lester Phillips! What is there about her that wins men to her? She is no prettier than I; she is not nearly so clever—and yet she is always the successful competitor for any prize. Is she really as artless as she seems? or just artfully artless? Heigho! things look pretty black for me."

The doctor had not yet returned from his rounds, so she sat down by the fire in brooding thought. All at once the colour mounted into her pale cheeks, and her eyes grew bright.

"I am a better judge of character than that golden-haired little fool," she said aloud, "and whoever is false I'll stake my best gown it isn't Derrick Lovelace. He can explain all if he chooses. I'll write him, tell him of what Nell has done, say how ill and unhappy she looks, and state my conviction that old mother Veribond is at the bottom of all the mischief. If only Nell sees him she will break faith with Lester Phillips, and then it may be I shall catch his heart (or his fancy, they are one and the same thing with men) in the rebound."

Seating herself at her davenport she began to write, but the letter cost her much thought. Often she paused, nibbling the end of her quill, as she digested sentence after sentence; but at last her work was ended, and she regarded it with some satisfaction. She had played the disinterested friend to perfection, and she fervently prayed with effect. Her note ran thus:—

"DEAR MR. LOVELACE,—

"I am afraid that I am about to inflict great pain upon you, but I believe that the antidote to that pain is in your possession."

"Briefly, Nell has promised to marry Mr. Philips. Now, I know that she cares less than nothing for him; but much mischief has been made by my father's idle gossip (he at least intended no malice), and Mrs. Veribond's excursion to town."

"You know her too well not to understand how she would misrepresent matters to gain her own ends, and how persistently she would torture poor little Nell into giving herself to Mr. Philips."

"I do him the justice to say he knows the truth only as represented by Mrs. Veribond, and

is content to take Nell on her own terms. But, if you could see her now you would pity where you blame, and do your best to rescue her from a cruel fate."

"She looks like a ghost, all her merry ways are things of that happier past she shared with you. That there has been some great and miserable misunderstanding between you I am confident, for Nell is a loyal little soul, and I am convinced that you deserved her trust and her love."

"I have taken much upon me in writing this, but I pray you to forgive my seeming boldness because of the love I bear little Nell, the esteem in which I hold you."

"With kindest wishes for your future happiness, believe me now and always,

"Your faithful friend,

"STELLA GOLIGHTLY."

"It will do I think," she said complacently. "I shall get a good reputation very cheaply, and it will be odd if I do not contrive to fill the place Madam Veribond covets for her child, only the time for action is so desperately short, and if Derrick holds out the victory is to the enemy."

When Derrick got that carefully-worded letter he read it through again and again. Nell was true in heart, though false in seeming. He had been over hasty, and appearances were against him.

He was now in a position to explain all without violating confidence or endangering the safety of those who trusted him. He would go to her, tell her the whole truth, and pray her for the love of Heaven not to blight her life and his by fulfilling her most unholy contract.

How sadly, too, they had misjudged Stella! For all her affection and haughty ways she was their true friend, and he should be always grateful to her, but on one thing he was resolved, if Nell would listen to him, they would be married at once, she should not be left again to her mother's mercy, and, even if poor, they would be happy, having love to gladden the way.

So he wrote Stella thanking her for her goodness, promising to run down to Guestland in a day or two, but asking her to keep this fact secret, as he feared if it leaked out Nell would be spirited away by her waspish mother.

Miss Golightly smiled as she read, "My turn has come," and deep satisfaction filled her heart.

CHAPTER VII.

By the gate stood Nell. It was fast growing dark, and the air was chill; but she heeded neither cold nor gloom, as, with little bare hands resting on the topmost bar she looked out over the desolate earth, with dim unseeing eyes. She had no tasks now to fill her time or occupy her thoughts; every little household duty had been taken over by Phoebe and Mrs. Veribond; the latter declaring it was not meet the future mistress of the Hall should engage in menial work.

Too restless to read, too unhappy to find comfort in her music, she spent the whole day wandering about the house and gardens. To Lester she was the most submissive of *fiancées*. Often it made his heart ache to see the change in her, but he hoped that when once she was his wife she would forget the man who had dealt so cruelly by her, and that love's aftermath should be more glorious than its first fruit. Oh! he would so encompass her with his devotion, so surround her with his care that instinctively she would turn to him. She was even now thinking of his goodness, wondering in her stricken heart in what wise she could repay it, shirking in fear from the thought of a long life spent with him.

Only six days of freedom remained to her; six days in which she might love Derrick without sin, and then, and then, "oh! Heaven be good to me," she whispered, "and set me free. I was mad with grief and outraged love when I gave my wicked promise. Oh! that I may die before its fulfilment! Oh! that he who loves me too well may forget me and be happy with a worthier woman—one who can give him her whole heart

freely, ungrudgingly, for he deserves something better than the mere empty casket."

Her weary face drooped over lower and lower until it rested upon her clasped hands; a moan broke from her white lips, sobs shook the slender frame. It was even then that Derrick came upon her, he heard her sobs, he saw her misery, all anger died from his honest, faithful heart, as, springing forward, he cried,—

"Nell, Nell, don't fret so bitterly I have come back to you, never to leave you any more."

She lifted her face to his gaze. It was white and stony, her sweet eyes were dark with misery, but pride was struggling for mastery in their depths.

"Go away," she said, trying to speak steadily, but failing utterly. "Go away; between us there is a great gulf, you dug it, not I—I only finished the work you had begun. You forgot me, deserted me; it had been kinder to tell me this, but yours was the refinement of cruelty. Your letter only confirmed your guilt, and so—and so—I promised to marry a man whose name I am all unworthy to wear."

"You take a high hand; but I have some ground for complaint too. You were over ready to believe evil of me, to listen to lying tongues; you who swore your love for me could never die. I thought better things of you."

"Are you prepared to say 'I had no cause for anger or jealousy'?" she demanded, passionately, "were you not seen both by Dr. Golightly and my mother in the society of a young and beautiful woman?"

"Yes, I was," bluntly, "but it does not necessarily follow I am in love with her. As a matter of fact, she is a married lady."

"Married! oh!" and Nell shrank away from him. "Derrick, how London has changed you when you can so boldly confess your aims to me!"

"If I did not love you better than my life I would leave you in ignorance of the truth. You deserve to suffer, for you have thought evil of me; but just because you were once kind and true, I will tell you all. This poor Mamie you are good enough to despise is the wife of Reginald Lomax, my friend, and her father's assistant. Mamie married him against Mr. Brunell's wishes, and he cast her off, though he did not send Lomax away. Brunell's partner wanted the girl himself, and he succeeded in cooking Reginald's accounts by way of revenge. There was a warrant out for his arrest, I took him in, and my landlady helped me to hide him, Mamie used to visit him daily, though it was hardly wise. Well, three days ago, the partner's plot was brought home to him, conclusively, the partnership is to be ended, Reginald is taken into favour, Mamie welcomed at her father's home. There is the case in a nutshell, and a pretty kettle of fish old Golightly and Mrs. Veribond have made between them."

"I hope you will be happy in your new life, especially when you remember how ready you were to believe ill of me, and how cruelly you have changed the world for me. Good-bye, no one will ever love you so well as I;" and he turned to go, but she, with a wild cry, stretched out her arms,—

"No, no! oh, Derrick! at least say you forgive me, do not leave me thus. We have been shamefully deceived, but I have loved you dearly, truly."

"Yet you are going to marry Phillips; actions speak louder than words."

"Remember, I thought you false; I did not much care whether I lived or died. I believed if I married *him* my heart would turn to him for he is good, oh, most good to me, and I was so unhappy at home. There have been times when I felt I must end it all by leaping into the pond at the end of the garden, perhaps I shall go there one day, I do not know, and very few would care."

"Nell, look me fully in the eyes and say if you can, I love you truly."

"I do, oh, I do! you ought to know that, Derrick, oh, Derrick—"

"Well, if you are loyal to me you will give Philip his *congé*. Nothing short of such an act will induce me to believe you. Come with me, Nell."

"Oh! do not tempt me; I am so weak, you so strong. We were each over-ready to think evil of the other, now we must dress our weird, tread out our measure as best we may, we have been too weak of faith and now we reap our reward. Dear, forget me and forgive me if you can; be happy with some worthier woman and leave me to do my duty by the man I shall soon call husband. Good-bye, it breaks my heart to send you from me, but, better a broken heart than tarnished honour."

So engrossed were they with their sorrow that neither saw through the gathering mist a horse and its rider, so close as to be within earshot. Lester had ridden up along the grassy way thinking to see his little sweetheart before returning home; with him he brought a costly gift—a golden bangle set with amethysts and pearls, and all along the journey he had been picturing Nell's pretty delight as she received it in her hands.

He saw the two figures by the gate, he reined in his horse, a deadly fear possessing him; he had no thought of eavesdropping; he only felt numbed with pain and doubt.

Then, as he paused, he heard their words. He saw Nell's frail, small hands go out as though to embrace that earlier lover; he heard her low, wild cry,—

"Leave me—leave me! I will not sin against Lester!"

Then, like one in a dreadful dream, he saw Derrick catch and hold her close, as he protested she should never leave him, his was the prior right and he would yield it to none.

"Alas—alas!" she cried, "there is neither help nor hope for us; I have given my word and I must keep it. Heart of my heart, good-bye; help me to be true!"

"How can you ask so much of me, Nell! And will you be true to yourself if you go to the altar with a lie upon your lips! You must promise to love this man, and I hold your heart!"

"Heaven have mercy upon me and forgive me my falsehood! Oh, Derrick, you were always brave and strong, where I was cowardly and weak; strengthen me, hearten me; but as you love me, never drag me down to the depths of perfidy. Day and night I shall pray that I may forget you—Heaven is good (let us say what we will in our despair) and Heaven will teach me how to do my duty towards my husband."

"But what is to become of me? Have you thought of all of that, Nell!"

She turned into bitter tears, but through all her distress she contrived to say,—

"Seek help, dear Derrick, from the only One who can give it! Yes, you may kiss me good-bye, but after let us never meet again."

And then Lester turned his horse's head; he would hear no more. It was unfair to those two poor young things—most distinctly unfair to Nell.

How hard she was striving to keep her promise! How ruthless she was upon herself! It had all been a bitter mistake, and it must be ended.

Would he bind her to himself when her whole heart was given to his rival? Would he take unfair advantage of her helplessness and unfortunate circumstances?

Slowly, thoughtfully, in bitter grief and pain he rode away, trying to brace himself to the sacrifice he knew he *ought* to make.

The bride hung loosely upon Sultan's neck, he went where and how he listed, for his master's heart was too heavy, his mind too engrossed to pay attention to him.

Presently they turned the bend of the road and suddenly Sultan roared; a cycling club was passing through Guestland and the lights startled the thoroughbred.

Trembling in every limb he paused a moment, then, before Lester could gain any control over him, sped with lightning swiftness along the road.

On and on, dashing from right to left, scattering the few pedestrians like leaves off of his way, the horse held on his mad career.

Vain were all Lester's efforts now to check his headlong course; he set his teeth as he realised

his danger; yet, why should he much care to save himself alive, since Nell was lost to him!

Suddenly he espied a waggon laden with coal coming towards him. He shouted to the driver to draw to one side, but either the man did not hear or was too stupid to understand for he kept straight on; the next moment Sultan had collided with the waggon.

There was a quick, sharp cry, the next instant both horse and rider were grovelling in the dust, and the animal overlay its master.

When help came it was found necessary to shoot Sultan, his injuries being too severe to admit any hope of recovery. Then kindly hands lifted Lester, placing him upon an improvised litter, where he lay dusty, bruised, blood streaming from his temples, and quite unconscious.

Gently they carried him to The Hall where Doctor Golightly presently appeared. He suggested that Mr. Phillips would need womanly care, and proposed that Stella should come over until other arrangements could be made. But the house-keeper, with a saturnine smile, said,—

"It is Miss Veribond's duty to attend the master, and, as I've sent over a message, I've no doubt she and her mother will be here shortly. I rather think the latter lady would be annoyed if she found her daughter forestalled."

In the great bed-chamber where generations of Triplets had died, lay Lester Phillips, unconscious of all that passed.

It was all one to him if Nell or her mother administered his cordials, or compelled him to take nauseous draughts; he knew neither, only when he rambled it was always of Nell, and as she listened she guessed that in some way he had learned the truth, and grieved the more.

Of Derrick she had seen nothing; it is true a note had reached her from him, but she would not reply to it, saying in her heart,—

"I will not wrong Lester while he is sick and helpless; I am his promised wife, and that I must never, never forget."

So the days wore by; great doctors came from town, looking grave as they bent over the patient's bed, and to herself Stella was ever saying,—

"How will it end! How will it end! I am not better off than before, and if he dies, they will be happy together, because he is sure to have made some provision for her; he loved the very ground upon which she trod."

Derrick had returned to town long ago, for it was now the middle of March. In the woods, one could scarcely step without crushing purple violet or dainty primrose; the anemones were all a blow, the trees were showing delicate green sprouts, whilst the birds made mad melody in their branches, and the little brooks laughed in the sunshine.

Then, and not until then did Lester return to life, and as his weary head turned upon the pillows he saw first a bouquet of freshly gathered wild flowers, then a pretty, pale, sad face, and as the past rushed back upon him he stretched out his hand, saying,—

"Nell, little Nell, why are you here!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"This is my proper place," she answered bravely, and dropping on her knees beside the bed, she looked pitifully into his dark eyes.

To this man, returning from the very brink of the grave, she was more sweet and fair than words could express, and yet—and yet his heart told him he must let her go.

With trembling fingers he caressed her sunny hair, saying weakly,—

"You have been too anxious for me, little one. Your face is paler, thinner than it should be, and your lips have forgotten to smile; I hardly recognise my Nell."

"It has been such a terrible time," she faltered. "For days and days we could not tell whether you would live or die, your life hung as it were by a thread—you did not even know me—"

"And if I *had* gone the way of all flesh, would you have grieved for me, Nell!"

"Yea," she answered, gravely and sincerely,

"because you are very dear to me; you have been kind and good to me always, and it is bitter indeed to lose a friend—"

"A friend!" he echoed sadly, "only that! Never anything more! There child, do not grieve; I meant to convey no reproach, and Heaven knows I would not have you feign a love you do not feel, or change your honest nature. Nell, dear, I am content," and then he lay so quiet she thought he slept, but he was pondering many matters in his mind, fighting a cruel fight with self.

He was quite certain now that Nell could never love him as he desired to be loved; he was just as convinced of Derrick's integrity and devotion; if he would act as became a man he would give Nell back to him.

But could he! could he! Was he strong enough to yield up the prize he had won with so much effort! She was inexpressibly dear to him, dearer now than ever, and in time she might learn to forget her early lover. Other women had done so, why not she! Still, deep down in his heart was the conviction that with Nell, "love was love for evermore." It was hard, but he was a man, he must bear his cross with fortitude; but when she had gone out of his life, leaving it empty and bare, what should he do with the waste years!

He spoke very little that day or the next, and always that battle raged within him; but on the third evening he had conquered self, and although the victory cost more than many a defeat, he was happier than he had been since the day when Nell had told him she did not love him, but would marry him if he still wished it.

It was Mrs. Veribond's turn to watch by him that night, and she found the patient very much awake.

"Do you know," he said, turning his grey eyes upon her, "that I consider you treated me very badly when you so deceived me with regard to Nell's feelings for young Lovelace? It was fair to none of those concerned."

She glared at him angrily.

"Do you regret your engagement? Is this your gratitude to my child for her goodness to you? I may as well tell you at the beginning that you shall not play that and loose with her; if you do not make her your wife I shall demand recompense—"

"You are exciting yourself needlessly, madam," he interrupted coldly. "I shall do what is right by Nell, not because it is right, but because I love her with all my heart, and her happiness must ever be my first consideration."

Mrs. Veribond breathed more freely.

"You must forgive a mother's anxiety."

"It would be easy to do so, if that anxiety was prompted by love; but, madam, I feel bound to say that your child has no place in your heart, that you would use her simply and solely for self-aggrandisement, therefore it devolves on me to remove her as soon as possible from your control. Nell never shall be badgered and bullied as in the past—"

"Pray don't excite yourself, you will retard your recovery and still further postpone your wedding-day. Of course you know Professor Lawes' opinion concerning you," said Mrs. Veribond, anxious to change the subject.

"Yes, there is only one chance for me—a long voyage, and in a day or two I shall make arrangements to start."

She moved uneasily. There was evidently something upon her mind, but Lester who saw this, could not help her in any way. Presently she said with an effort,—

"Is Nell to go with you? The child is looking desperately white and ill; travel would be beneficial for her, I believe."

"I think she wants rest most," he answered gravely, "and certainly I do not intend marrying in my present state. I don't want a nurse but a wife; and it would be terrible if I died in some outlandish place, leaving her alone and unprotected."

She dared say no more then, but she did not like his seeming indifference; it would be dreadful if after all he jilted Nell; but when she approached her husband on the subject, he utterly refused to interfere, saying,—

"I am not anxious to be rid of our bairn, Maria, and Philips will do the right thing; he is an honourable man, and my only wish is that Nell could bring herself to care for him. If you had not worried her into the engagement she never would have listened to him, and I can't help feeling ashamed that we misjudged Derrick so shamefully."

"Derrick was no fit mate for her," cried Mrs. Veribond, with a toss of the head, but even she felt that she might go too far with her usually easy-tempered husband and forbore to press the subject.

After weeks of suffering, Lester began once more to get about; he was very weak and feeble, leaning upon his stick for support, and accompanied by Nell, he walked in the sunny gardens until Professor Lawes said it was now safe for him to undertake his journey, and he had best make his arrangements with despatch.

That last evening in Guestland he sat with Nell in the pleasant library. She had chosen a low stool beside him, and his hand now and again rested lovingly on the pretty, sunny head.

There was a bitter sorrow in his heart, a terrible sense of loneliness; but he was strong to hide all his pain from her, as he said,—

"When I come back again, Nell, let me find you with roses on your cheeks, and the old glad light in your eyes; you are too young to be so grave, little one; and if it is I who have changed you, I shall find it hard to forgive myself."

"You are always most good to me," she answered, gratefully; "you have nothing with which to reproach yourself, Lester."

"And, despite my age, my ill-health, you will cleave to your bargain!"

Her lips trembled but she said, quietly,—

"You may trust me. I should, indeed, be evil and cruel if I could act aught but justly towards you. I shall miss you so much—so much. There is only father, beside yourself, to love me, and at times even he must seem harsh to me if he would have peace, that is worse to him than all else beside, because I am so dear to him."

He drew her nearer.

"Soon, dear heart, you shall reign in your own home, and then, please Heaven, no care shall cross you, no harshness vex you. Keep a brave spirit, little Nell, the dawn is breaking!"

Yes, the dawn for her, the night gathering for him! But this she did not guess; she thought he spoke of the days which would follow his return, of the life she would be called upon to share with him; and, although her heart failed her, she said, gently,—

"I will do my best to deserve your love and your esteem; if sometimes I fail—if sometimes my ignorance vexes you, try to remember what I was when first we met; that a helpless little soul I am! And oh, Lester, Lester! teach me what my duty is, and how to do it. You have chosen a very foolish girl to share your life."

"The best and dearest in the world, sweetheart! But may I never live to see you changed into a worldly woman, and the old Nell lost for ever!"

In the morning he left for London, and it was understood he intended to make a tour of the world.

"There is something more in this than meets the eye," said Golightly to his daughter; "perhaps, after all, his engagement to Nell Veribond is broken! If that is so, there may be a chance for you when he returns! I must make inquiries."

"Can we hold out until that time?" Stella demanded, "and you had best let matters alone; you never interfere that you do not make mischief."

It must be confessed that the Veribonds were surprised to hear, a week later, that Lester was still in London, and did not intend to sail for another ten days. At the close of that time he wrote to Nell, saying,—

"DEAR HEART,—"

"I am leaving England to-day, and Heaven only knows when I shall return, if ever; but I felt I could not go without a word to you, although from to-day I pass out of your life."

"Little Nell, on the night of my accident, I

learned the whole truth. I was mad, I believe, with pain and misery then, but I have come to believe that all is for the best, and that Derrick Lovelace is the one man who can make you happy."

"I purposely refrained from saying this to you because, although I am strong enough to give you back your freedom now, I doubt if I ever could have done it with your dear face before me."

"Derrick is with me here (Southampton), but he will be in Guestland to-morrow, when he will have something of importance to tell you. He is a good fellow, Nell, and I can trust you safely to his keeping."

"You will not refuse to accept a wedding-gift from me; it is lodged with my bankers, Messrs. Hartemann and Co., but Derrick Lovelace will make you acquainted with all particulars."

"I have loved you well, I shall love you until I die; but you must not think of me as unhappy, whilst I still have the memory of golden hours spent with you, remaining to me. Heaven bless and keep you in the fervent prayer of,

"Your true friend,

"LESTER PHILIPS."

She bowed her face upon her arms and wept, almost forgetful in her pity for him, that she was free, and Derrick was coming back to her in joy. Could any man have acted more nobly! She prayed he might be happy, that very soon he would forget her; but this prayer was never to be granted. His "whole life's love had gone down in a day," but he would live on in its memory, die with it still keeping warm and pure the inmost recesses of his heart.

Three days later Derrick arrived, much to Mrs. Veribond's disgust; but she dared not refuse him admission, her husband having suddenly developed a spirit. In the comfortable living-room the young man found his little sweetheart waiting for him. She was very pale and thin, the mere ghost of the merry Nell he used to know; but if something of youth and gaiety had gone from her never to return her beauty was of a nobler, stronger type; she had passed through the furnace and had come out of it like pure gold. Not a word passed between them as he joined her; these first few moments were sacred to love. But when each had grown calmer he said,—

"Have you nothing to ask me Nell—of *him*? Never was there a truer friend, a more unselfish lover."

"I know, I know—and I deserved so little from him," regretfully.

He did not think so, and Nell all we have, all we shall ever be, we owe to him. That he might make the way easy for me, he has bought me a share in Brunell's business, which means comfort, even luxury—as we term luxury—for us, and he has placed to your credit at Messrs. Hartemann, the sum of two thousand pounds as a wedding-gift. Why Nell, darling Nell, you are crying when you should be glad."

"I am glad, yet how can I help being sorry too!—he has given us all, and I can do nothing for him in return. Oh, I hope, I pray he may forget me, and love some one worthier to be his wife than I."

"He would have to search far and wide to find your equal," said Derrick fondly; but Nell shook her head.

The improvement in Derrick's prospects somewhat reconciled Mrs. Veribond to the change of suitors, although she would never cease to deplore Nell's infatuation, and to lament her lack of common sense. But Mrs. Lovelace had received the girl back into her affection with open arms, even begging forgiveness for being so ready to think ill of her; and in June they were married, Mamie and her husband being among the guests.

Stella Golightly, in a fit of desperation, married a rural dean well on in the sixties, but with a good substantial income, and although she had no love for her father, just to avoid exposure, she paid his heavy debts, setting him free from all anxiety.

Two years later Lester returned. Bronzed by

travel, restored to health, and apparently happy; but deep down in his heart is an undying pain, a fruitless yearning. Only Nell does not guess this, when occasionally he visits the pretty suburban home, and makes much of the little ones there. His favourite is a wee, golden-haired girl, rejoicing in the name of Daisy, but to Lester she will be always, as her mother was before her, "Little Nell."

[THE END.]

An Italian has invented a new musical instrument for the future of which great things are predicted. In appearance it resembles a small upright piano. The keyboard is like that of the piano; but the hammers, set in motion by the keys, are tipped with metal instead of leather, like an exaggerated music-box. The music is said to be very pure and sweet of tone, though not very loud.

A SUSPENDED city has been discovered off Glacier Bay, Alaska, by a party of excursionists. This curious phenomenon is seen regularly after full moon in June, and at no other time. It is said to be a beautiful mirage of some unknown city, suspended directly over the bay. A photographer has taken pictures of it four times, but no one has been able to identify one of the ghostly buildings outlined.

A PRIMITIVE notion existed among the Romans and other races that a bridge was an offence and injury to the river god, as it saved people from being drowned while fording or swimming across, and robbed the deity of a certain number of victims which were his due. For many centuries in Rome propitiatory offerings of human victims were made every year to the Tiber; men and women were drowned by being bound and flung from the wooden Sublician bridge, which, till nearly the end of the Republican period, was the one and only bridge across the Tiber in Rome.

To go about the usual affairs of its daily existence minus a head, would appear to be a rather unsatisfactory business, but this is precisely what certain insects seem capable of doing. Experiments have been made with common house-flies, with the curious result that thirty-six hours after decapitation the bodies were seemingly as lively as ever. The bodies of butterflies have lived eighteen days after the heads were cut off. On the other hand, the heads soon lose all signs of vitality, rarely showing any indications of consciousness after six hours. Whether the spinal cord and column do not extend above the shoulders of these insects, or whether there is some error in the theory that the severance of the spinal cord is fatal, would seem to be debatable ground. There are fishes that have a peculiar faculty to life. If the head of the common fresh-water cat-fish or bull-head is cut off immediately after the creature is taken from the water, its heart will be found to beat for some time.

A SINGULAR phenomenon occurs on the borders of the Red sea at a place called Nakous, where the intermittent underground sounds have been heard for an unknown number of centuries. It is situated at about half a mile's distance from the shore, whence a long reach of sand ascends rapidly to a height of almost three hundred feet. This reach is eighty feet wide and resembles an amphitheatre, being walled in by low rocks. The sounds coming up from the ground at this place recur at intervals of about an hour. They at first resemble a low murmur, but before long there is heard a loud knocking, somewhat like the strokes of a bell, and which, at the end of five minutes, become so strong as to agitate the sand. The explanation of this curious phenomenon given by the Arabs is that there is a convent under the ground, and that these are the sounds of the bell which the monks ring for prayers. So they call it Nakous, which means a bell. The Arabs affirm that the noise so frightens their camels when they hear it as to render them furious. Scientists attribute the sounds to suppressed volcanic action—probably to the bubbling of gas or vapours underground.

POOR LITTLE LINNET.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE month of July found them—the Countess, Linnet, and the Nobles, brother and sister—located quietly at an unknown and unfashionable sea-side town on the east coast, not many miles removed from Agglestone itself, whither they had gone for change of air and scene after the time of trial and sorrow they had lived through at the Abbey, now nearly two months back.

It was Gordon who at first suggested that they should all go away somewhere in company; and it was he who had fixed upon Breezy Bay as the place.

Breezy Bay—in reality little more than a fishing hamlet—was quiet and bracing, absolutely unknown to the cheap tripper, and the healthiest spot perhaps in England. It would suit them exactly, Gordon told the Countess cheerily.

Lady Bourdillon made no objection—raised no obstacle to the proposition.

She was willing, indeed, in a dull apathetic way, to do just whatever Gordon Noble willed. A little child, at this time, could not have been more docile than Lady Bourdillon.

But the docility was not enough to see, nevertheless.

It was as though, her life being robbed of all warmth and hope and brightness, she cared no longer to go on living.

Nothing seemed to interest her, nothing to rouse her. She would have wept and brooded by herself from morning until night had Gordon and Irene allowed her to do so.

From that dark hour when they had carried Derrick Bourdillon to the grave from the sombre old home where he had breathed his last, the Countess herself was a changed woman.

Her heart, as the often said, was quite broken; and yet she lived on, wondering dimly why she did so.

Instinctively, in her great bereavement, she turned to Irene—to Irene, and not to Linnet.

No, never again could she give to the young girl, the daughter of her adoption, the old, full, trustful love of the past—never again think tenderly of Linnet as the child of the dear friend of her youth.

Ah, nevermore!

And, as the sad, slow days went by, they drifted farther and farther from each other; drifted apart surely, though almost imperceptibly, notwithstanding that promise which Lady Bourdillon had given to her son, as they stood—she and Linnet—by his death bed, their hands clasped together across it as he lay there.

It was the dead man's memory which kept them sunder—the dead man's shadow as it were lay between them, and neither could step over it.

It was a barrier intangible, yet insurmountable; they could never come together in amity any more.

There was a certain still reserve on the side of Lady Bourdillon that was not to be penetrated; and whenever she addressed a word to Linnet, the girl could never feel at ease.

And so in the hush that succeeds the tempest, they had migrated for change to the little town of Breezy Bay; and, each day drifting farther and farther from the affections of the Countess, Linnet found herself at length almost as an alien in their midst—lonely, inexpressibly lonely—for Irene and Lady Bourdillon were always together and inseparable, living their lives, so to say, not in the present, but in those memories of the past which linked them together.

One sweet calm evening, when the red sun seemed to touch the level sea on the horizon, Linnet strolled out, alone, after dinner, to obtain a breath of fresh air on the shore after the unusual heat of the day.

No one wanted her in the house, she knew.

She had left Irene reading aloud to the Countess in the drawing room, with the rose-shaded lamps already lighted, and the French windows, opening out on to a balcony bright with scarlet geraniums, ajar to admit the soft sea air.

Gordon himself had started for Agglestone early in the morning—business matters alike at the Abbey and at Windy waste calling him thither—and they scarcely expected him to return that night.

Breezy Bay was indeed a primitive little town, though growing every year; but at present with neither band nor pier to beguile of an evening the few stray visitors who came to the place solely for rest and quiet, and for the keen, bracing, health-giving air which blew in from the German Ocean.

Wearing a simple white gown of embroidered Indian muslin, with narrow black ribbons at her throat and waist, Linnet strolled down to the shore in front of the modest esplanade, all so still and deserted now, and thence sauntered idly on to where the cliffs rose upward majestically, topped here and there by huge tufts of the reedy spear-grass that overhung in picturesque fashion the rugged base beneath.

The tide was far out; the distant sea calm, quite calm; the sunken rocks revealed, alimy, black-green, dangerous, were stretching flatly seaward in wild and broken patches.

The sun was fast sinking below the horizon line, tinting sky and sea with lovely hues. Soon it faded from view altogether, and over land and water spread a monochromatic purple-grey.

Under the shelter of the beetling cliffs the sand was dry and hard, and so Linnet sat herself down rather wearily, and stared at the far distant waves, or rather rippling wavelets, just agitated by a rising breeze—a solitary young creature there on a solitary seashore—herself the only living object visible, save a plaining, low-wheeling curlew, in the midst of that silent desolation.

The awful loneliness that reigned everywhere about her was not more perfect than that sense of "aloneness" which had oppressed her young soul so heavily of late—which even now was lying like a subtle burthen upon her in that hushed, secluded spot.

Here, as she sat, with sad young dreaming eyes turned wistfully seaward, and little brown fingers loosely clasping her knees—thoughts of the past and of the future flitting thick and fast across her brain—here Gordon Noble found her.

She had heard no footsteps—the sand had deadened all sound of them.

His hand, before she knew it, was laid upon her shoulder, and she started up with an affrighted exclamation.

"Dreaming, Linnet?" he said, with his own kind smile.

"No—yes! Oh, Mr. Noble, is it really you?" she cried irrelevantly, in her astonishment at beholding him there. "Why, I thought you were a long way off, at Agglestone. We thought you were not returning until to-morrow."

"I thought so myself when I left you this morning," he returned; "but the business which summoned me away was all arranged and done with much earlier than I anticipated. And so as there was a capital opportunity of getting back to Breezy Bay this evening, I only too gladly availed myself of the same. And now, Linnet, why have you wandered to this lonely place all by yourself—eh? Tell me."

"It was so dreadfully dull and quiet in the house," she answered miserably and truthfully, "I felt stifled. I suppose the Countess has sent you to fetch me home!"

"No; I came out to look for you entirely of my own accord," he said, gazing straight and earnestly into the little brown troubled face. "Irene informed me that you had gone out somewhere, and I simply told her that I would go and find you. I fancied I might find you on the esplanade."

"Oh, I hate the esplanade!" sighed Linnet, unamiably.

The twilight was deepening rapidly; the sky was all purple now; they could hardly distinguish the heavens from the glorious still sea itself.

The silver stars were twinkling out one by one; a mysterious red light from some passing ship or other shone momentarily out over the cold, dark stretch of water.

Yonder, around the sunken flat rocks, now lost in gloom, there was a subdued and ominous

murmur—the tide was growing and heaving suddenly, and soon would be rolling inland over the dim and level sands.

Gordon and Linnet were standing face to face there—two dark figures now upon a lonely shore. "Do you know that I am beginning to think that you have altered very much of late, little Linnet," he said musingly. "In many ways you are scarcely the Linnet Lethbridge of a year ago. Somehow I cannot quite think that you are happy, dear. Tell me, Linnet—are you?"

"Is it greatly to be marvelled at if I am not?" she demanded, with something like a passionate sob in her throat. "Who knows better than you do, Mr. Noble, what I have gone through—what I have suffered? I do not think that you should talk of happiness to me. I—I wish I were dead—yes, I do!—and lying at the bottom of the sea!"

He possessed himself suddenly of her two little unloved hands. Holding them firmly by the wrists, he drew a long, hard breath.

Then he said: "Linnet, I am going to ask you a question. I believe," uttering the words fast, his hold on her wrists tightening unconsciously, "I believe now that I came out to look for you this evening, in order that I might put it to you plainly, and without any further delay.

"For many days past indeed I have been anxious to speak, but somehow have lacked the requisite courage, I think. And even now—" He stopped and gazed absently over the darkling sea.

"Yes! Go on, please," said Linnet, faintly, more than a little bewildered at his manner. "And—and may I tell you, please, that you are hurting my wrists rather."

He loosened his hold directly, but stepped quite close to her. She felt his warm breath on her forehead. It fanned her soft brown hair.

"Dear," he whispered, "you confess that you are unhappy. Let me comfort you. Give me the sole right to do so. For, Linnet, I have loved you long and faithfully; and I want your answer to-night."

Linnet could never analyse her sensations of that moment accurately, though she remembered afterwards that she had grown suddenly very giddy and faint.

Not knowing what she did, she caught at his sleeve to preserve herself from falling.

"You love me!" she managed to say, weakly enough. "You—love—me, Mr. Noble! You who at different times have shown yourself so cold and formal to me! Oh, forgive me for telling you so—but it sounds too utterly wild and impossible!" laughed Linnet, a little hysterically.

"Wild and impossible! Never think that, Linnet. For the day on which I first saw you, that day, dear, I loved you," declared Gordon, with tender gravity. "And can you, my darling, assign no reason, he went on, "for my past forced, unnatural coldness and indifference? I was cold and cruel, dear little one, because I loved you—loved you so well!"

"It was because I saw too plainly, indeed, that poor Derrick himself loved you as well as I, that I stole my heart, or rather tried to steal it, against you, Linnet."

"If he can win her, I used to think and say to myself, 'he will be saved. Why then should I interfere between them? I am nothing to her. Derrick Bourdillon is my dearest friend, and for his friend, we know, a man should be willing to forfeit his life even.'"

"And so I held aloof, and was cold to you, dear, because I dared not trust myself to be kind. Do you understand?"

"But you could not love him, after all—it was not to be, it seemed; and—and, Linnet, you know how it has all ended."

"Do not tell me now that it is yet too soon to speak of these things. You could not give him the love he craved of you—there can be neither sin nor wrong to his memory in telling you the truth, the simple truth, now."

"I have kept my pain and longing to myself for so long, Linnet; tell me, dear, that I need suffer no more."

With drooping head and clasped, quivering

hands Linnet listened, trembling in a sort of wild, dumb joy—an ecstasy of thankfulness and gratitude that touched the element of pain itself.

And so he really loved her after all!—had loved her indeed all along!

How good and brave and noble he was! How bravely and unselfishly he had acted throughout! Her only hero heretofore, he was doubly her king and her hero now.

Who was she, she thought humbly, that she should have won for herself such a precious love as this!

"Well!" he said, anxiously, but very gently, "have you no word for me, Linnet?"

She found her voice then, and lifted her eyes. "And you really want an answer now?" she questioned shyly.

"You know it, my darling," was all he said. "Then I—I love you, Gordon," she whispered.

"Ah, little Linnet!"

She finished her answer to him fearfully in his own words,—

"The day on which I saw you first, Gordon, that day I loved you."

Into the sweet shelter of his strong arms he gathered her then and there, pressing his cheek to hers, and kissing her lips reverently. Heart to heart, lip to lip, she had gained her recompense at last.

Misunderstanding and doubt, yearning and disappointment, cloud and shadow, pain and heartache and sorrow—all alike were over now; and the hollow-sounding waves, rolling nearer and nearer to them in the gloom, swelling over the rocks and showing their white crests in the twilight, seemed to be whispering and murmuring amongst themselves of the old sweet story just told once more on their sands under the cliff, and singing, too, of the everlasting wisdom of an all-wise Creator, who, in earthly matters generally and for repining mortals in particular, in His own good time and season ordereth all things for the best.

When Gordon Noble asked the Countess for her consent and her blessing, she heard him apathetically, refusing neither the one nor the other.

She cried a little, however, then, she murmured "God-speed," and looked at Linnet, the girl fancied, somewhat reproachfully.

But perhaps on the whole Lady Bourdillon was not much surprised at the news Gordon brought her, any more so than was his sister Irene.

Indeed Linnet more than half suspected that the Countess derived no small amount of comfort from the reflection that she—Linnet herself—would soon be entirely off her hands, well and happily provided for, and no longer an inmate of the Abbey.

After the tidings were once broken to her, Lady Bourdillon never again alluded to what might have been, and seldom indeed to the impending marriage.

One subject might have led to and touched the other, and the bitter memories of an irrevocable past might perhaps have been stirred with needless pain. The chances and changes of the present were of little import to the Countess now. As they all knew, she did not seem to live in the world around her—her hope and creed were centred in the future unknown.

She, poor soul, was only waiting.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEFORE the spring came round again Linnet found herself the wife of Gordon Noble, and had "pitched her tent" with him at Windy waste in real earnest.

There is no occasion to dwell on the theme of her great contentment and happiness, her husband's strong devotion, her adoration of him.

They were perfectly happy and deeply thankful—their life lines, they acknowledged, had fallen in pleasant places indeed!

After the marriage Irene went for good and all

to Dreadmere Abbey, there to nurse, to minister to, to soothe and comfort Lady Bourdillon in those last, sad closing days of melancholy and shadow.

The old Countess now could not bear Irene out of her sight. Day and night the two were together, mother and daughter in all but name.

Regularly every morning Gordon used to go over to the Abbey—the ghostly, gloomy, silent old house which had always been such a luckless one—exactly as he had been wont to do in the by-gone times. Occasionally, Linnet would accompany him, but, as a rule, he went alone.

People got to say at length that it was a shame that Miss Noble, with her perfect loveliness and grace, should be mewed up from the world and all society in that dreary old Abbey, dancing constant attendance on a stern and poshish old woman. It was a shame and a sin, they said.

Could it possibly be her own choice? Linnet, who knew her well, and the secret of her life, knew also that it was Irene Noble's own unselfish choice, and that she gloried, moreover, in her charitable woman's work—both gloried and continued in it for Derrick Bourdillon's sake.

At the expiration of two more years or so, the old Countess was almost childish, quite feeble, though very hard at times to manage.

Irene, in truth, must have had a weary time of it; yet she never complained.

Mrs. Kidd, who came often to see Linnet, used to declare, emphatically, between her wheezy puffing and panting, that—

"If over there was a Christian female saint on this earth, it was Miss Irene. It was just a beautiful sight to see her with the feeble old Countess and her so irritable, too, always."

Mrs. Kidd, indeed, delighted in paying "Miss Linnet" and "Mr. Gordon" a visit at Windy waste, and one day she brought them the information that her niece, Phoebe Black, was married, and had settled with her husband—a general dealer—in Agglestone village. Yes, actually the wooden, stolid Phoebe! Surely, then, no young woman need despair, said Gordon, amused.

It was a still, bitter night in winter, with the snow lying thick and smooth upon the ground.

The chestnuts around Windy waste were gaunt and stark as seen against a leaden, lowering sky.

The great mere at the Abbey was frozen over, and its bordering sedge and rushes were all brown and flattened and withered.

All things seemed lifeless and dumb in the nipping cold air of December.

On such a winter night Linnet started from her slumber by Gordon's side. Terrified—whether dreaming or awake. Was she once more enwrapped in an odorous spring twilight, half sitting, half crouching upon an oaken window-seat in the gloomy old drawing-room at the Abbey, with the mullioned lattice pushed out amidst the creepers and the roses, and with the fragrance of magnonette and heliotrope commingled waiting in—sitting there and listening in dumb terror to a sound that came in to her with the breath of the dewy garden?

Ah no! In an instant she realised her present surroundings. With trembling touch she roused her sleeping husband.

"Gordon, Gordon dear," she whispered, fearfully, nestling shudderingly towards him, "I—I have heard the old bell in the ruined chapel at the Abbey!"

At first he could neither understand nor believe her. "You must have been mistaken," he told her soothingly, when he was thoroughly aroused. "It was only a dream, my darling, rest you assured."

"No, no, no—I was not dreaming, Gordon! I heard it distinctly," she whispered back, earnestly.

Yet he was incredulous, and tried to comfort her further.

"You have an attack of the nerves, my dear little wife," he said, kindly, "or else, in a dream, you fancied—"

Then out upon the night's black silence even to them at Windy waste, there came the soft, muffled tolling, and the measured reverberation, which, once heard by anyone, could never be forgotten.

Linnet, at any rate, knew it again.



LINNET STARTED UP WITH AN AFFRIGHTED EXCLAMATION AT THE TOUCH OF MR. NOBLE.

"There, there, dear!" she cried, faint with fear, "Listen—you hear it, yourself, now, Gordon!"

He wound his strong arms protectingly about her, and she buried her head in his breast.

Gordon himself then was convinced, and could doubt no longer.

Early next morning, over the level frozen snow, Linnet beheld Irene Noble coming hurriedly towards Windywaste.

Her sealakin coat was wrapped closely around her; her pale, exquisite face looked even paler than usual.

Blank indeed was the morning, and was that the reason of her walking so fast?

She crossed the slippery rustic bridge athwart the ice-bound stream, where the naked elder-boughs and nut-bushes were trailing earthward all white and fantastic, and hastened up the hard sloping lawn to the hall door.

Linnet herself was just dressed, as it chanced; but Gordon was not.

"Go down to her, my darling," he said.

And Linnet went softly.

They met at the foot of the staircase, and kissed each other lingeringly. But neither spoke a word.

Then Linnet led her sister-in-law into the pleasant breakfast-room, where a glorious fire was burning on the hearth, and where the icy breath of winter was not.

They stood there together before the fire for a few moments in silence, and then Irene laid her head upon Linnet's shoulder, weeping at last freely as she clung to her.

"The Countess, dear!" interrogated Linnet, gently. And Irene's weeping answer came:

"She died in her sleep last night. I am here to tell you so."

Irene Noble never married. All such women as she are faithful unto death.

When Lady Bourdillon—who bequeathed all that she had to leave, with the exception of a few legacies to old servants, divided equally be-

tween Gordon and his twin-sister, making in her will no reference whatever to Linnet—was laid by the side of her son Derrick, Irene returned to Windywaste. Linnet and Gordon together insisted on it.

And when the strangers to whom Dreadmere Abbey passed by right came there to live, pulling down the venerable ivy-clad ruin, the ghostly old chapel and the picturesque cloisters, and introducing all manner of so-called improvements of the strictly modern school, then Mrs. Kidd herself too forsook the gray old Abbey, scandalised and hurt, and absolutely declining to serve under these new arrivals, whose architectural notions, it seemed, were so utterly radical and pagan.

With Gordon's consent Linnet asked the old lady to become her own housekeeper at Windywaste—to serve her, whom Mrs. Kidd had once known as Linnet Lethbridge, as zealously and as conscientiously as she had served Lady Bourdillon at the Abbey.

Gladly enough did the worthy old soul agree to the suggestion.

She came to Windywaste full of gratitude and full of years, and after a brief and faithful spell of service, there she calmly died.

Linnet herself is an old woman now—an old woman, indeed, both a godmother and a grandmother.

Her hair, her soft, pretty, once-brown hair, is as silver-white as ever were the locks of the Countess, and the wrinkles on her forehead, in places, are quite as marked and deep as Lady Bourdillon's in the old days that used to be.

For as Gordon Noble's mate and life-long companion, Linnet has been no stranger to sickness and to sorrow. In each one's life-path thorns will crop up, let the way be ever so rose-strewn. Grim trouble, alas! is the natural birthright of man. More or less, it falls to us all!

Sitting together sometimes in the firelight, his hand stroking hers, his steadfast eyes, no longer young and beautiful, resting tenderly on her face, Linnet and Gordon talk quietly of Derrick Bourdillon, the man whom he loved with such

changeless affection, notwithstanding his sins and the life he lived.

And so speaking of him, they remember the old Abbey and the days Linnet spent there in her early womanhood.

And rambling on thus, from one recollection to another, their well-stored memories grow clearer and clearer; until at last they chat of the dim long ago as if forsooth it were only yesterday.

And in the dying embers they picture once more the scenes and faces of the shadowy past.

Heigho! thinks Linnet, holding Gordon's hand, just a sigh for those dead years that can return nevermore—and the tale is ended.

THE END.

A CURIOUS barometer is used in Germany and Switzerland. It is a jar of water, with a frog and a little step-ladder in it. When the frog comes out of the water and sits on the steps a rain-storm will soon occur.

A SOLID silver railing, weighing twenty-six tons, will inclose the altar of the Church of the Lady of Guadalupe, in the City of Mexico. The estimated cost of the edifice is several millions of dollars. It is to be dedicated on December 12.

THE hottest place on earth is the vicinity of Maszowah. When the north-west blows from the desert the thermometer has been known to go to 100. The men of the Italian garrison there can sleep only by the assistance of natives employed to go to and fro all night and sprinkle the bodies of the sufferers with water.

THE Chinese "yellow jacket," is rather a vest than a jacket. It is made of rich yellow satin, has no sleeves, fits the wearer closely, and reaches to the thighs. It is fastened on the side with small buttons, and has embroidered on the bosom the royal dragon of China. There are but half-a-dozen men in the empire who are entitled to wear it.



BERYL WAS THE MOST EMBARRASSED OF THE TWO, AS SHE PUT OUT HER HAND, HESITATINGLY.

STEPCHILDREN OF FORTUNE.

—201—

CHAPTER XIII.

ROBERT HUNTER went home to The Firs in anything but a happy frame of mind; his discoveries about Kenneth Bertram had wounded him to the very heart, for he had loved the young man almost as a son, and had felt a strange pride in the handsome barrister's gifts and fascinations, excusing his indolence on the ground of his being so much sought after by fashionable people, and making as many allowances for him as his own father would have done.

It was not only the debts which revolted the merchant, he had a horror of a man's living beyond his income, but he could have forgiven a great deal of extravagance to his favourite. No, it was the systematic deceit which Bertram had carried on towards his oldest friend; the disgraceful discounting of Beryl's fortune (before she had even accepted him) as a sop to his creditors; the certainty that he had proposed to his cousin solely for the sake of her future inheritance.

"And to think that I was fool enough to believe in him!" thought the merchant as he leant back in the corner of his first-class carriage and tried to decide how much of the truth he should tell Beryl: "to think that I was so utterly gulled I did my best to persuade the child to accept him! why, he'd have broken her heart before a year was out! Beryl's too much like her mother for dishonour not to tell on her, and it's precious little of anything else she'd have got as Kenneth Bertram's wife."

At last he made up his mind he would tell his daughter everything, she had never had any but cousinly affection for Kenneth, and it was far better for her to learn the truth from her father than for her suddenly to be enlightened some day by a stranger; besides, as Mr. Hunter intended to forbid his kinsman The Firs, anything less than the truth would not have explained this extreme step to Beryl.

She was waiting to meet him in her pony carriage, and her father's loving eyes saw at once that something had troubled her; he did not speak till they were out of the station and bowling along one of the green lanes that are still to be found within twenty miles of London; then he asked quietly,—

"What's wrong, Beryl? you'd better tell me, child, Gipsy's not likely to make a bolt with us, even if you don't pay much heed to your driving, and I can't have you look like that without knowing what's the cause."

"I'm afraid you will be terribly surprised," said the girl, gravely, "but I have had a most unpleasant visitor."

"You don't mean that Kenneth Bertram has—"

She interrupted him.

"Kenneth has not been near, but just before lunch a card was brought me inscribed 'Mr. John Hill,' and a message that a gentleman wanted to see me on most particular business. I thought it was someone collecting subscriptions for a charity, and that I had better see him and get rid of him."

"To my horror he was a lawyer's clerk and he wanted Kenneth's address. It seems he is most terribly in debt, and some of his creditors have obtained judgment against him, and he is hiding from them. I can't understand it, papa, I thought imprisonment for debt was abolished."

"It's the same thing under another name," said Mr. Hunter: "if a man disobeys a judge's order it is called contempt of Court, and they imprison him for that. I'd have given a good deal to spare you this, my dear."

"But you don't seem surprised, papa!"

"I don't think I shall ever be surprised at anything again, my dear. Well, I suppose you told Mr. Hill your cousin had chambers in Norfolk-street."

"Yes, but he did not believe I was speaking honestly. He said that the bailiffs were in possession at Norfolk-street, and Mr. Bertram was in hiding somewhere, and the most natural place

for him to choose would be The Firs owing to our engagement. Of course I told him I was not engaged to Kenneth and never had been. Then his manner changed as if by magic, he had been horrid before, perfectly horrid, but after that he was quite civil and respectful. He said he had been acting under an egregious mistake, but it was not his fault, as Kenneth had announced the engagement right and left, and even given out the wedding was to be in September. He said the creditor he represented was in a small way of business, and that Kenneth owed him over two hundred pounds and if he could not get any of it he would be ruined. I promised to speak to you about it, but Mr. Hill said you would be too indignant with Mr. Bertram's subterfuge to pay his debts."

"I have been going through a very similar experience, Beryl," said Mr. Hunter, gravely, and he told her all he had seen and heard that morning. The girl looked very grave as she listened, and her first words were, strange to say, neither blame nor anger, but pity.

"Poor Kenneth!" she said, sadly, "what a dreadful life he must have led lately."

"I don't think he deserves pity," said her father, indignantly; "he is a thorough-paced scoundrel."

"But think of how he must have plotted and manoeuvred; think what it must have been to him from day to day on the brink of a precipice, never knowing when exposure would come, and to have to go on adding deceit to deceit just to ward off a little longer the day of reckoning!"

"Yes, he can't have had a pleasant time of it, looked at in that fashion; I can forgive everything sooner than the wrong to you."

"The wrong to me doesn't matter," said Beryl, cheerfully. "If I had ever been in love with Kenneth, I suppose I should feel it dreadfully. If I were obliged to meet these people I should be uncomfortable, but you know, papa, you and I never come in contact with Jews or money-lenders; even if the whole tribe choose to think Kenneth has jilted me, or that you have dis-

covered his conduct and parted us, it can't hurt me really. I don't feel in the least like a forsaken maiden, I assure you."

"The sting of it is in this, Beryl," said the merchant, very gravely, "these reports are not easily forgotten, dear; in days to come when you meet a lover you can care for, it may wound him to believe that you were even for a short time engaged to such a scoundrel as Kenneth Bertram."

She never blushed or faltered; but a brave spirit shone in her beautiful eyes as she answered,—

"I don't believe I *could* care for a man who did not trust me, and anyone who trusted me would take my word before that of idle gossip."

Mr. Hunter sighed.

"I meant to forbid Kenneth The First, but if he is supposed by his creditors to be there, depend upon it, Beryl, he'll give Barton a wide berth."

"What will become of him?" asked Beryl, with more anxiety than she had yet shown. "If he was ready to turn over a new leaf, papa, won't you lead him a helping hand?"

"I told his lawyer to-day I'd do something towards paying his debts, but Mr. Brett says fifteen thousand wouldn't make him a free man; he'll have to go through the Court, Beryl, there's no help for it."

Beryl shuddered; she was not a modern girl in some things, and bankruptcy meant to her a terrible disgrace.

"Is there no help for it, papa? You are a very rich man, and—"

"I could pay his debts without feeling it, granted, Beryl, but in all probability he'd run up another lot for me to pay in a year or so. If they are paid in full people will go on trusting him in spite of any amount of warnings. No, he must get his discharge, if he can, and then, I think, the best thing will be for me to make him an allowance. I can't leave him to starve. It's plain he will never get on at the Bar, and I don't think he'd be worth his salt at business."

"Couldn't you give him a clerkship?" suggested Beryl.

"My dear child, can you fancy Kenneth Bertram in my office taking orders from Bates? It would never do. He'd have to begin as a junior, for he knows nothing of business, and his pride wouldn't stand it; he'd upset all discipline and order, set a shocking example of indolence to the younger clerks and worry poor Bates almost to fiddlestrings! No, my plan is best, but I shan't let him know of it yet awhile."

"We shall miss Kenneth," said Beryl, thoughtfully, "he always seemed so bright; I wonder how he could with ruin staring him in the face."

"Yes, we shall miss him," agreed Mr. Hunter.

"It seems to me, Beryl, we are very lonely folks, you and I! Kenneth Bertram was the only creature we were really intimate with. You'll have to go out more, child, and pick up some new friends."

"But I don't like new friends, papa, old ones are best."

The conversation was interrupted then by their reaching home, but Mr. Hunter renewed it that evening after dinner.

"I've been thinking, child," he said, gravely, "it might be as well if I were to retire; I've as much money as I want; more than enough to give you a handsome fortune when you marry. If I sold the business we might travel abroad for a year or two."

"So that you might look for a son-in-law?" said Beryl, eagerly. "Thank you, papa, but I'd rather not. You'd be simply miserable if you gave up the business you are so fond of; and I don't think we should either of us care for a roving, aimless life in foreign parts, where we knew nobody, and had nothing to do."

"You said just now we should miss Kenneth, and I thought you might be dull this winter."

"I shall miss him," said Beryl, simply, "because in many things he was just like a brother to me; but I shall get used to doing without him, and don't you see, papa, if we went away suddenly, it would look as though—here the girl blushed crimson, "that horrid report was true."

"So it would," said Mr. Hunter quietly, "only I never thought of it; what a wonderful head you

have, Beryl. There, we'll just stay where we are and take care of each other."

"Yes;" then after a pause, "have you heard any more about the five hundred pound, cheque?"

"There's nothing to hear," said the merchant, gloomily. "It was paid in gold, you see, Beryl, so there'll be no tracing it; of course, that had had it, though why he should have robbed me I can't say. It's the worst day's work he ever did, for, of course, no one will employ him without a character."

Beryl Hunter thought life was very unfair. Here was her cousin, Kenneth Bertram, behaving, her own father had said it, in the most disgracefully dishonourable way, yet he was presently to have a nice little annual income without doing a stroke of work to earn it. Poor young Stuart was disgraced for life because he was suspected of a crime which had never been brought home to him, and which he consistently denied committing.

The punishment meted out to the two men seemed cruelly unequal.

"I wish you would forgive Mr. Stuart," she said, impulsively. "You are so rich, papa, the money can't matter to you, and it's dreadful to think of that poor fellow's whole life being shadowed."

Mr. Hunter shook his head impatiently.

"We've discussed this point before, my dear, and I gave you my reasons. I can't take Stuart back, because it would be a direct encouragement to the other clerks to help themselves to anything of mine they found lying about. You don't understand business, my dear, and must leave this matter to me."

Beryl Hunter answered nothing, but she happened to go to London not many days later, and she found her way to the district of Ashley Green.

She knew the Stuarts lived in Church-street. Mr. Bates had casually mentioned to his employer that the family had occupied the same house for over a hundred years.

Beryl hardly knew her object in going so far from her usual haunts. Her sympathy had been attracted to the blind man and his children the first time she had seen them on the river steamer, she had felt an interest in them ever since, and some impulse she could not resist led her to the quaint old-world district.

Perhaps she should meet the sister; she knew her perfectly by sight.

Beryl felt she would just like to tell her there was one person connected with Hunter and Co.'s who did not believe her brother guilty.

Miss Hunter bent her steps first to the public garden, where not many months before Bob had told his love story to Etta Stuart.

The trees had lost their first freshness now, the leaves looked dusty and tired, as though they found life in London fatiguing; but some of the borders were gay with dahlias and china asters, the summer sun lighted up everything, the seats were all occupied, and Beryl had some difficulty in finding a vacant corner of one.

She wondered, at the seat there, why her life had been cast in such far pleasanter lines than those of the people round her.

Everyone, she noticed, was poor, many shabby, all wore that grave, resolute air which divides the worker from the idler; even a few of the "unemployed" had no air of leisure, perhaps, poor souls, because their work, the seeking after employment, was the hardest toil of all.

No one begged of her, no one grumbled about their ill, and yet the helpless knew that between her and them was a great gulf fixed—she was the child of affluence, they had been reared in poverty.

There were some feeble steps among the people in the city garden, but there was no blind man in the sunny walks or sitting on the benches.

Beryl was wondering more than ever why she had come and thinking she must be going on, when a familiar name fell on her ear.

"Yes, my girl's left her place," said one matron to another who sat next Beryl, each carrying a baby, "and sorry I am too; the Stuarts are main kindly people, but they were in trouble and had to do their own work."

"But it'll come hard on 'em," said the other,

"so very genteel as they are. Law, Mrs. Brown, I can remember the old gentleman—this one's father—he thought as much of himself as if he'd been Prince of Wales; he lived to be eighty, and little he thought his son'd take lodgers, or his grand child wait on one."

"Well, this one 'll never live to be eighty," said gossip number one. "He's looked little better than a shadow for months, and now he's had a fit or something, and he's mortal bad, the doctor goes there twice a day."

An awful feeling of dismay had come to Beryl; was this *their* fault? Had the accusation, just on unjust, brought against Jack to answer for his father's illness?

She got up suddenly her resolve taken. She asked one of the women which was Church-street, and in a few minutes she was walking down the quiet thoroughfare, and looking at each house much as Lancelot Underwood had done not many weeks before.

And then a little in front of her she noticed a gentleman. A man who in his way looked as much out of keeping with Church-street as Beryl did in hers. She hurried on and caught him up, plunging at once into her question,—

"Can you tell me where Mr. Stuart lives?"

"Yes, at number fifty-five;" he hesitated, "forgive me, but I do not think he can see strangers. He is dangerously ill."

"Oh," Beryl caught her breath, "do you know the family well?"

"Tolerably well. I am lodging there. Can I take any message for you—or would you like to see Miss Stuart?"

Beryl looked at the stranger frankly.

"I don't think she would like to see me. I am Mr. Hunter's daughter."

"Indeed," and Lancelot looked interested. "You have not come to bring them word the real thief is found? You would not have hesitated in that case."

"Oh, you know about it! I was afraid to mention it unless I was sure you had heard."

"I have heard the facts. I know the case looks black against Stuart, but, Miss Hunter, he never did it. I'm only a man of the world without any fastidious feeling, but I *couldn't* believe John Stuart capable of theft. He's not made that way."

"So I told papa."

"Then you know him?"

"I have seen him three times. Once with his blind father, once with his sister, once at the office; but I seem to know him, and the moment I heard the story I said I was sure there was a mistake somewhere."

"And your father?"

"Papa is a very strict business man. He goes by the plain hard facts. I wanted him to take Mr. Stuart back and trust to fate to unravel the truth in time; but he said it would be a bad example for the other clerks."

"I don't think Stuart could go back unless his name was cleared," said Lancelot.

"Well, I feel so sorry for him, for them all. I was in London to-day, and I thought I should like to come down here and tell them there was just one person at Hunter's who believed in his innocence, and then when I got here I heard two women talking of Mr. Stuart's illness, and of his poverty, and then I did not like to go to the house for fear they should think I was mocking their trouble."

"I understand; but, Miss Hunter, I fancy Elizabeth Stuart would welcome anyone who believed in her brother. The aunt is—a trifle peculiar, but you would not see her, she never leaves the sick room."

"And Mr. Stuart?"

"Oh, Jack!" said Lancelot, after puzzling for a moment as to whether this meant father or son. "Jack is out. He has found some sort of employment."

"Got a situation? Oh, that's good news."

"No, Miss Hunter, not a situation, he'll never get that while there's a blight on his name, but he has certainly got a job of some kind. He earned half-a-crown yesterday and a shilling the day before. We can't make out what he does, and his earnings depend evidently upon his being fine. He won't answer any questions, but he

has seemed brighter since he began to bring in a trifle again."

They were at the door now. Lancelot opened it with a key and guided the visitor to the sitting-room where the Stuarts generally took their meals. It was empty, but the bird sang merrily in the window as though the family calamities had been unable to quench its spirits.

And then, before Mr. Underwood could go in, search of her Elizabeth came in. There could have been no greater contrast than the two girls, the one in all the bloom of youth and beauty, dressed in the latest fashion and with every mark of wealth about her; the other sad, wistful, heavy-eyed, with a plain gingham dress which repeated washing had faded sadly from its original colour, and with a look on her face which told of hope deferred and ever-present anxiety, as she said,—

"Miss Hunter."

Beryl was the most embarrassed of the two, and she put out her hand hesitatingly, almost as though she doubted if the other girl would take it.

"I heard of your father's illness," she said gently, "and I could not help coming to tell you how sorry I was—there nothing we can do for you, papa and I!"

"Nothing," said Elizabeth, who besides the family horror of charity, could not have touched anything purchased with Mr. Hunter's money after his hard judgment of Jack, "but it was very kind of you to come."

"How is Mr. Stuart?"

"The doctor says he is not in immediate danger, he is to be kept quiet and fed up, and not to worry about anything. They might as well tell him not to breathe," added Elizabeth sadly, "he can't help worrying."

"Things will come right," said the other girl hopefully. "I feel sure your brother's innocence will be proved at last. I told papa so."

"And Mr. Hunter?" breathed Elizabeth.

"He said he should be only too thankful. Try and keep up your courage, Miss Stuart; the clouds will have a silver lining yet."

The big tears trembled in Elizabeth's eyes. Lancelot, who had remained in the room only because Beryl stood between him and the door interposed.

"I have tried to tell Miss Stuart and her brother that it is always darkest before the dawn," he said gravely, "and that if they can only weather this time of clouds, the sun must come out soon."

There was a look in his eyes as they rested on Elizabeth, which made Beryl Hunter fancy the very pleasant-faced lodger might himself be the "silver lining" to Miss Stuart's cloud; but she only flashed a grateful glance at him for his cheering words, and then she kissed Elizabeth on the cheek, and went out, followed by Lancelot. He walked by her side in silence the length of Church-street, and then asked,—

"May I get you a cab, or shall I see you into an omnibus?"

"A cab, please; or stay, I will walk to London Bridge and take a steamer there. I am very fond of going down the river."

Lancelot walked on beside her, he did not consider the daintily-attired damsel fit to take care of herself. She kept silent for a few minutes, then she said sadly,—

"It seems so hard—my father is a rich man, and he would grudge no expense to come to the bottom of the mystery, but there is nothing to be done."

"It will take time," said Lancelot, "but we have a clue, though only a faint one."

"You will not trust it to me?"

"I am sworn to secrecy. Mr. Bates declares that the clue may be destroyed by the guilty persons if the faintest suspicion reaches them. We hope to prove Jack's innocence."

"And you will see them through it?"

"I have to return to my colonial home in a few months, Miss Hunter, but this much I may tell you. If Jack Stuart is still under a cloud when I leave England I shall ask him to go out with me. There would be a good opening for him in our firm, and a far larger salary than he has had in England."

CHAPTER XIV.

THINGS had gone uncommonly badly with Kenneth Bertram, at least in that gentleman's own opinion. The very day after that walk with Etta before alluded to, the crash he had so long feared actually happened, and to use his own rather forcible expression—the game was up.

For months he had been living on his wife, and the credulity of various tradespeople trusting vaguely to righting himself by a wealthy marriage. Now that chance was lost for ever. Beryl Hunter would never be allowed to bestow herself and her fortune on a bankrupt, and a bankrupt Kenneth knew he must certainly become.

Writs and summonses poured in. Mr. Bertram was utterly unable to cope with them. He went round to his quondam school-fellow, Mr. Brett, and put his affairs unreservedly in the lawyer's hands.

"Do the best you can for me," he said coolly, "of course it means bankruptcy. Get me through the court and I'll pay your costs somehow. My very virtuous relations in Kent will be good for that much, meanwhile I'll lie *perdu*."

"You'd much better stay and face it out," said Brett, who was an honest fair-minded man.

"Thank you, it might end in landing me in prison, and I decidedly object."

"Where are you going?"

"If I tell you I am going to implore the help and sympathy of my *fiancée* and her father, you can believe me or not as you like," said Bertram.

"And money?"

"Well—I've five hundred pounds, an old friend sent it the other day and it will see me through this mess! What, give it to the creditors you say, Brett! Nonsense, it wouldn't be a shilling in the pound for them and would lead to no end of squabbles; besides I must take care of myself, charity begins at home."

He went down Gray's Inn road in a very thoughtful frame of mind and turned into a large hairdresser's shop in High Holborn with the first step towards concealment decided on, the golden brown moustache and bright curly hair were objects of pride to their owner, but he valued his liberty higher, and he emerged from the hairdresser's with both hair and moustache several shades darker.

His next visit was to an optician, where, complaining of the glare of the August sunshine, he was soon provided with a pair of blue spectacles, which, though they did not at all improve his sight, very materially assisted in changing his appearance.

It was impossible to return to his chambers for clothes, but it is wonderful how soon an outfit can be procured when a man is an average figure, is not over fastidious, and has plenty of the needful. In half-an-hour's time, Mr. Bertram had quite as much luggage as young men generally take about with them on their travels.

By this time he was hungry, so leaving the new portmanteau in a railway cloak room, he turned into a City Restaurant where he had more than once been Robert Hunter's guest.

It was a bold stroke, but Kenneth was driven to it, because, before he carried his plan any further, he wished to discover whether his disguise was successful. He wore a plain, well-fitting morning suit of rough, dark tweed, a round felt hat, and a coloured neck-tie, just such an attire as hundreds of men wear in London at their daily vocations, but quite different from the faultless and fashionable Bond-street suits and tall silk hats Mr. Bertram had affected.

Bates, his uncle's managing clerk sat at the very next table to Kenneth; the latter politely asked him to pass the newspaper, he did so without a sign of recognition. Two or three city men, old acquaintances of Mr. Hunter, were also lunching at the same restaurant, but not one of them noticed the solitary man in brown tweed, or detected any resemblance in him to their friend's fashionable kinsman.

"It'll do," muttered Kenneth to himself, "and do a great deal better than crossing the channel, and kicking my heels in some dismal hole. I shouldn't dare to go to any place frequented by Englishmen for fear of being arrested."

He took a cab from Ludgate Hill station over London bridge to the Surrey side, and then he engaged some apartments near enough to Church-street, Ashley Green, for his meetings with Etta to be of very frequent occurrence. Etta Stuart counted for something in his plans now. He had lost all chance of winning an heiress, and as far as it was in his nature to love at all, he did love this foreign looking girl with her impulsive ways and passionate temper. He gloried in winning her from her sober going, respectable, hard working lover; it was a triumph of Bohemianism and freedom over the Philistinism of the lower middle class.

If he was to come down in the world and be an exile from his old haunts he must have some companion, and no companion in the world would be so useful as a wife devoted to his interests. Yes, he would marry her, this little nursery governess whom he had meant to treat only as a passing plaything. He would condescend to raise her to his lofty sphere, partly because, after his fashion he really loved her, but yet more because he feared a retribution that might yet fall upon him.

He was the real committer of the crime for which Etta's brother had lost his good name and his means of livelihood; if ever a day of reckoning came surely it would be better for the sinner if Etta were his wife. Jack Stuart, then, could not exact a pitiless revenge, because every blow he struck at Kenneth would also wound his own sister.

Amid all the confusion and extra work which a serious illness brings to most houses, especially those of people with small means, Etta Stuart found herself with an unusually large amount of solitary leisure. Aunt Mary reigned supreme in the sick room, if she wanted an *aide de camp* she sent for Elizabeth or Mr. Underwood, never Jack or Etta. The former broke down hopelessly in his father's room through grief, and Etta's very presence seemed to irritate the sick man and make him restless.

Downstairs, Elizabeth was the presiding genius, she cooked, tidied, swept and dusted. Etta's help generally entailing such an amount of grumbling that she dispensed with it, and so the second Miss Stuart was free to pass her day in the parlour reading cheap novels by the open window.

Mr. Stuart had been ill three days when, as she occupied her usual seat, Etta became conscious that a small, shock-headed boy, was watching her intently, the scrutiny was too keen to be pleasant, and she said, irritably,—

"Move on, little boy, you shouldn't stand staring like that!"

"Be you Miss Etta Stuart?"

"Yes," said Etta, much surprised; "what do you want with me?"

"Gent said I was to give you this when no one was looking," and slipping a note into her hand the youth made off at his quickest speed.

She opened it quickly, a little nervous as to its contents; she knew the writing for Kenneth's, but, why—oh, why, had he risked sending a note by hand?

"Call at 140, Jenifer-road, and ask for Mr. Bernet."

Much mystified, Etta did the very thing that might have been expected, she went upstairs and put on her hat.

"Going out!" asked Elizabeth, as she met her on the stairs. "Bob will be here in a few minutes, hadn't you better wait till he is gone?"

"Goodness, Betty, what a fuss you do make about Bob!" said Etta, irritably. "I shall see quite enough of him by and-by; too much, I expect."

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk; I can't sit mewed up here all day. Oh dear, I don't know what we've done that we should be condemned to live in a place like Ashley Green."

"Etta darling," and the elder girl's tone was full of pleading, "just tell me you are not going to meet him!"

"I'm not going to meet anyone, Betty; I don't know though who the pronoun represents."

"The gentleman you used to meet at Barton."

"And who exists only in Mr. Underwood's imagination. What a meddlesome Matty that man is; he ought to be ashamed of himself."

This outburst only convinced Betty the charge had been a true one, but she said nothing more. It was useless to argue with Etta, and the latter soon went out, banging the door after her with a noise which was more a relief to her perturbed feelings than an intentional unkindness to the blind sufferer upstairs.

Jeffer-road was, perhaps, a mile from Church-street, it opened on to the high road, whence tramways ran to Rotherhithe and Deptford. Etta had known Jeffer-road, by name, all her life, though she had never expected to make a call there. The houses were all exactly alike; the same number of windows and steps, exactly the same doors and roofs; the only difference perceptible to the outward eye was that some had cards of apartments in the windows and others had not.

No. 140 belonged to the last-named category, and still, rather bewildered, Etta knocked at the door and asked for Mr. Bernet. A slatternly-looking woman received her very graciously.

"Walk in, miss, walk in; your brother's been expecting you this long while."

Etta found herself in the best parlour with a young man whom she thought a perfect stranger until he removed his blue spectacles and spoke her name in a low, wooing tone.

"Etta!"

"Kenneth—but no, it can't be!"

"It is," replied Kenneth, smiling; "but, please to remember that to my worthy landlady and the world at large, I am Mr. Bernet."

"But why?"

"Sit down, and I'll tell you. I'm in an awful mess, but I can trust you, Etta; you'll not betray me!"

"Never while I live," and she kissed him fondly; "but what is it, Ken? Oh, with a shudder, 'surely your cousin has not changed her mind and written to say she wants to marry you?'"

"Not she," and "Mr. Bernet" actually laughed; "the truth is, Etta, I've lost a pot of money; I'm over head and ears in debt and so I've come here to be quiet a bit till matters have blown over, and a lawyer, I know, has arranged my affairs."

Any other of the Stuarts would have been disgusted, but Etta's code of honour was very, very different from her family's.

"I'm glad you're so near," she said, "I can see you very often."

"That's what I hoped. I have described you to my worthy landlady as my sister."

"Shall you be here long, Kenneth?"

"Can't say; a few weeks, I suppose; but I've made up my mind on one point, Etta; when I leave this cheap and decidedly nasty neighbourhood, a certain little girl goes with me. I am free now, you see, darling, and the first use I make of my freedom is to throw it at your feet. We can be married quietly at the church round the corner as soon as I've been here long enough to constitute a residence."

It was the very first time he had spoken of marriage; he had often alluded to their future being spent together; had told Etta when things went wrong at home she was to "come to him," but this was the first time he had alluded to the ceremony which would give her a right to do so.

"But you forget one thing, Ken," she said ruefully, "there's Bob."

"And he's rather a big obstacle," said Ken with a smile; "never mind, my darling, if you haven't the courage to tell him you have changed your mind, there's always the alternative of marrying me and leaving him to make the best of it."

"So there is."

"How did you get on the other night? had they locked you out, poor little girl?"

"Oh no; the house was all asir, father had been taken ill suddenly."

"I suppose he feels this trouble about your brother," said Mr. Bertram gravely, "but he mustn't take it too much to heart. Young men will kick over the traces sometimes, only it puzzles me to guess what he wanted such a sum for."

"If Jack took it depend upon it it was for ather," said Etta, "they make such a fuss about

his seeing an oculist, and they are all far too proud to go to a hospital, they say it's not genteel."

"It's more genteel to take five hundred pounds, eh?"

"Oh Kenneth, don't," and her tone was eager, "even now I can't really believe Jack did it."

"Depend upon it he yielded to a sudden temptation," said Bertram virtuously, "and we mustn't be too hard on him. Is your father better now?"

"Better, but still very ill; he is in bed, and Aunt Mary waits on him. They have sent away the servant, and Betty does the whole work of the house, including attending to the lodger."

"I am getting very jealous of that lodger, Etta."

"You need not be," she pouted; "I hate the very sight of him."

"How has he offended you?"

"Well, he never seems to notice any one but Elizabeth, he overlooks me altogether, and he actually told Betty he had seen me at Barton frequently walking with a gentleman who was not Bob; of course, Betty made no end of a fuss, but I am not going to be dictated to by an elder sister who never had a lover in her life, and is as prim and proper as an old maid."

"No indeed."

"One comfort, they don't expect me to wait on father, they say I'm a very bad hand at nursing."

"Then I shall come off badly," said Ken; "we'll hope I shan't need your tender cares young lady, and now tell me when shall we be married."

Etta looked bashful.

"There's Bob," she suggested, plaintively.

"Bother Bob, you little deceiver. I don't believe you care two straws about him or what becomes of him, so long as you don't have to marry him."

"I shan't do that. The monotony of the life would kill me. I've hated Ashley Green ever since I was old enough to hate anything, but I never in my life hated it quite so badly as I do now."

"Then leave it," persuasively.

A silence.

"You needn't think I'd keep you here," went Ken, "this wouldn't be much better than Ashley Green, as soon as ever my affairs are a bit settled I am going to France. Some of the watering-places in Normandy are lovely in September, and we could put in a few weeks there very well."

"France!" there was a subdued longing in the girl's voice; "oh, Ken, how did you guess it. You couldn't possibly know how much I long to go to France—all my sympathies, all my tastes and feelings are French. I've been blamed ever since I can remember for being so foreign-looking, and having such un-English ways, so isn't it natural I should long to go to France? I shouldn't be odd or singular there, and oh, I long to see something different from the dreary poverty of South London."

"Of course you do, and so you shall if you're a good little girl. I don't wonder at your taste for France. In many things you are more French than English, and the first time I ever saw you I took you for a foreigner until you spoke. I should say you had some French relations."

"My Aunt married a Frenchman and died young," said Etta, "but I only found that out by accident, no one ever speaks of her at home. She did something very wrong according to the Stuart code."

"Which probably means she eloped. Will they say a few weeks hence of you that you did something very wrong?"

"I dare say."

"Couldn't your sister—Elizabeth as you call her—console Mr. Sawbones for your loss?"

"No one will do that; he is quite foolish about me; besides Betty is cut out for an old maid."

"Remember, your wedding with Bob is fixed for September, and this is the twentieth of August, don't run things too close, little girl."

"I won't—there will be an awful commotion Ken; they will be ready to kill me."

"Then come to me—we can be wedded any time by licence."

"I will speak to Bob," said Etta slowly, "at least, I will try, but I tremble at the very thought of it."

"And then when he's off your mind we'll marry and go abroad; you mustn't expect any very gay doings just at first, Etta, we shall have to wait for those till Brett has put my affairs in order, but any way Dieppe or Trouville must be more cheerful than Ashley Green."

"Rather," said Etta vaguely.

Five minutes later she was out in the narrow street walking rapidly towards home, and quick as were her steps, a woman kept her ever in sight. Carefully, noiselessly, the woman, who had been the cause of James Stuart's illness, "shadowed" Etta, but it was only when the girl had reached the public-garden crossing, which made a short cut to Church-street, that a thin, claw-like hand was laid upon her arm, and a trembling voice called her by her name.

(To be continued.)

TWO MARRIAGES.

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CHAPTER XII.

TEN days later Miss Grey sits over the embers of a bad fire in the cedar-room—alone of course, and very tired, as is not uncommon from a hard day's work in the housekeeper's room; but what is not so usual—in tears. And why?

She has two letters in her lap, and they are open, and we will read them.

The first is her own, returned from Southsea, with "Gone away; no address left"—so much for the mislaid to the Blaines. The other was from her cousin Jane, and ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR GEORGINA,—

"Your letter received. We are all very much surprised at your news, and to hear that you are leaving Lady Maxwell already. I hope it is nothing unpleasant. We would be very glad to have you here, but the house is quite full, and we have several sets of visitors coming that will keep all the rooms occupied for some time. I hope you will soon get another situation. There is a home of some kind in London for governesses. I dare say I can get you the address, and you have your salary in hand, I hope! Perhaps your friends, the Blaines, could take you in. Excuse the haste to catch the post. —Your affectionate cousin, "JANE VANCE."

Rather a crushing effusion. As Georgie read it through the second time her tears began to fall, and she asked herself, rather hopelessly, what was to become of her? Where was she to go?

She leant both arms on the round centre table, laid her head down upon them, and indulged in a thoroughly good cry.

She was tired—the was cold; the fire was all but out, and she was telling herself that she was not wanted anywhere.

At this juncture a single knock came to the door.

No answer. She did not hear it. Another, and then Mr. Gilbert Vernon cautiously entered the apartment.

In a moment he had taken in the whole scene. The dismal, shabby room; the round table, with the cloth half-dragged off; the girl's attitude, typical of despair; the empty grate; the general dreariness of the entire picture!

Georgie started up, pushed back her hair, and looked at him fiercely.

"This—is this my own private apartment!"

"I wanted to see you," he returned, meekly—trying hard to look as if he did not know she had been crying. "Is it true—I got it from my aunt with difficulty—that you are going away?"

"Yes, I am!" she returned, rather defiantly.

"And when, may I ask?"

"In four days' time—next Tuesday."

"And why!" laconically.

"I cannot tell you," irritably.

"And where?"

"You would make a capital lawyer, Mr. Vernon. I cannot tell you this either, as I do not know myself."

"Your friends?"

"I have no friends!" impatiently. "Don't talk to me of my friends!"

"Then let me be your friend, Miss Grey. Such as I am you may rely on me to help you. Do not look at me like that and laugh. I am serious, and you are angry and sarcastic. As a rule I can't bear young ladies! This is candid, is it not? But I like you, and will be only too happy if you will let me help you."

"Help me! You cannot! Assistance from you would be worse than none!—thank you all the same. Though I am younger than you, and know nothing of the world scarcely, I know that much. No young man can help a girl, unless he has relation, such as her brother, her cousin, husband, or—"

"Or her lover," added Mr. Gilbert, significantly. "You have neither father, brother, or cousin, Miss Grey!"

"No; very few people have as few relations as have."

"Then, if I ask another question will you be angry, I wonder?"

"I cannot tell; very likely I shall," impatiently. "Why should you question me?"

"Just one more, and the last; have you a lover?"

"Mr. Vernon, it is no business of yours, and you are very strange to ask; but, since I have told you so much, I have not—not a soul in the world, except one girl, who is abroad, cares two straws whether I am alive or dead!"

"Oh! I say, Miss Grey, come," he expostulated.

"Then read that," tossing him Jane's letter. "That is from my cousin—from the daughter of my mother's only and very rich sister—from my nearest kin. Perhaps," with an unpleasant little laugh, "that will convince you!"

Her visitor presumed to take a seat at last, and glanced over the note in his hand with a frown on his face; then pushed it back towards her, and said,—

"You are well rid of such people, that's all I can say."

"And they think themselves well rid of me."

"Now, have you any plans, may I ask?" leaning his elbows on the table, and looking over at her steadily.

"I really do not see why you should ask, Mr. Vernon; but I dare say you mean well, and I ought to be grateful to you for the interest you take in me. You will observe that there is no competition for the pleasure of my company! I think I shall advertise again at once, go up to London, and look out for some quiet lodgings where I can stay until I get another situation."

"And you go on Tuesday, I think you said?"

"Yes, on Tuesday morning."

Georgie was slightly surprised that he made no further remark, but pushed back his chair and abruptly left the room. Certainly he was a very strange young man. She did not dwell long upon Gilbert and his unexpected visit and abrupt departure; but knowing that there was not much time before post time she got out her writing case and proceeded to draw up another advertisement for the papers. She spoiled several sheets before she accomplished a few lines that notified that "A young gentlewoman would be glad to take the place of nursery governess in a small, quiet family; remuneration not so much as an object as a happy home."

This was to be an evening of visits, for she had put the above into its envelope the door opened and Lady Maxwell entered, in her red shawl, and on the verge of tears.

"Oh, my dear girl, you are not writing about another place, I hope!" she gasped. "It's not to be thought of. Gilbert has just been to me, and I'm—I'm quite upset. I never saw him so resolved upon anything as your staying on for the present, and you know I have often told you I would do anything for Gilbert—anything; and

he wormed it all out about Lizzie, and how it was her doing, and she insisted on your going. I had to tell him all!" cried the old lady, simultaneously raising her fat hands and her voice. "He said he would never come here again if I turned you out for Lizzie's whims; and I told him how I did not want to part with you, and how I begged and prayed Lizzie, and how she said you were getting undue influence of me for your own aims, and money, and all that," she panted out; "and that in my interest you should go! But it's not what I wish, and you know that; and that, though Lizzie is my niece, she tyrannises over me, and makes me do things against my will. You are to stay if you will. Say you will," seeing Georgie shake her head. "Oh, you will; you must at least for a month at any rate, to please me! Georgie, now, you can't refuse me," patting her on the arm, and now playing her last card, "Lizzie is going—going next week! She shall go and you will stay. Now, not another word," beating a quick retreat to the door, as was her custom, before her reinstated companion could find any appropriate reply.

For two or three days, Georgie (still in the cedar-room and unknowing of the contest) was a kind of shuttlecock between Gilbert and Lizzie.

At one time Lizzie worked upon her aunt's fears most successfully. Again Miss Grey was to go; but a few minutes talk with Gilbert would change the whole aspect of things, and Gilbert and Lady Maxwell were victors, and the result was that Georgie was to stay as long as it suited her convenience.

The guests little knew of the secret struggle that was going on, and all took their departure without ever having seen or heard of Miss Fane's skeleton in the cupboard, her aunt's pretty companion; and once they had gone their several ways Georgie reappeared as usual, and took up her former task of reading to and writing for her employer, driving with her, and arranging her wool-work and crochet.

Gilbert, now that he had had his way, and that Lizzie (who did not leave) had been wonderfully civil of late to Miss Grey, took little or no notice of her, but devoted himself to his cousin as a kind of amends, riding with her, skating with her, walking with her, and altogether paying her more attention than he had ever done in his life before.

He had beaten her in her attempt to get rid of Miss Grey, and he wished to show that he was a generous victor, though they never—never touched upon that delicate subject. All the same, although Mr. Vernon now scarcely spoke to his *protégée*, he thought a good deal more of her than any one suspected, or than he could account for to himself.

He found himself thinking of her in the midst of Lizzie's most animated conversations, most vivid descriptions.

Despite of himself his eyes constantly strayed to where she was sitting. His ears were ever on the alert to hear what she was saying.

Never had any one occupied his mind so much since he was born. Could it be that he had fallen in love with this pretty nobody, without a penny, and with, as far as his experience went, a somewhat sharp tongue? He believed that he had, and prepared to abandon himself to circumstances without another struggle.

Miss Fane's acceptance of the situation and her own moral overthrow had been a marvel to her aunt, but Miss Fane's anger and her aims were not extinguished.

They were merely smouldering, and ready to break forth into full activity at a moment's notice, being only kept in abeyance by prudence.

Mary Todd was in her mistress's confidence, Mary had her own reasons for detesting "the companion," and Mary was ready to aid her young lady, heart and soul.

She liked adventure and excitement; she looked on life as a kind of play, and people as the puppets of circumstance.

She had no fear and no scruples; had a face that lied as well as her tongue with the most unblushing effrontery; and she felt that she would like to see a little drama acted at the

Manor—just a little easily-got-up scene—that would represent the banishment of Miss Grey in the deepest disgrace.

"Just you leave her to me, miss," said Mary to her mistress, "and she won't be here another week, as sure as my name is Mary Todd! Don't you be surprised at anything, miss—that's all I ask you."

Mary had a plot sketched out in her head; but before Miss Todd had time to mature her scheme a great surprise awaited her no less than every one in the place and in the neighbourhood. Mr. Vernon finding that Miss Grey was resolved to seek another situation, and was adamant to Lady Maxwell's entreaties that she would stay (knowing well that she was liable to be sent adrift at a moment's notice, the moment Mr. Vernon went, and Miss Fane resumed ascendancy), and she was resolved to accept the first suitable offer that came her way.

This she had told Mr. Vernon very impressively, when he had tried to prevail on her to change her mind.

"I suppose you have heard of nothing yet, Miss Grey!" he said, finding her in the library, alone for a wonder, before dinner, where she had hurried down to finish off one or two notes for Lady Maxwell.

"Nothing as yet, Mr. Vernon," she replied, looking up as she finished directing one envelope; "but any post may bring me an answer."

"It's a nursery-governess you wish to be this time!" scanning her closely.

"Yes," evading his eyes, and making a show of being busy.

"An awful billet, I should say," shrugging his shoulders. "I think I know of something that might suit," he said, after a considerable silence, as he stood at the opposite side of the table, and watched her deft and nimble fingers fold a three-cornered note.

"A situation for me, Mr. Vernon!" she echoed, suddenly looking up, pen in hand. "It's very, very good of you to interest yourself so much. Is it anyone you know?" her eyes now fastened on his face.

"Yes!" He spoke always rather slowly, just on the verge of a drawl. "Someone I know very well."

"And is the place vacant at present?" she asked, with kindling interest, for she longed to be gone for more reasons than one.

"Yes, it is; in short, I don't exactly know how to put it, but the situation of Mrs. Gilbert Vernon is not filled—will you take it?"

"I suppose this is a joke!" said Georgie, now scarlet, her hand trembling as she dipped her pen in the ink. "I assure you, Mr. Vernon, that you have it quite to yourself. I fail to see the point of it!"

"It's no joke, Miss Grey. I never was more in earnest in my life. I never asked a girl to marry me before, and you toss your head and call it a joke!" in an aggrieved tone.

"Then, if it is not a joke," she said, now gravely looking at him, "you must be mad."

"Thank you," reddening with anger. "I am so far perfectly sane. I ask you to be my wife, and you call me a madman."

"For your own sake, yes," rising; "think of your position and mine."

"You are a lady; that's quite enough for me."

"I have no money, no position, no connections."

"But I have, and can give them all to you. What's mine is yours."

"Think of your aunt, Miss Fane, everyone!"

"I won't. I don't wish to think of anyone but you; but I see there is no hope for me. You are glad of all these excuses, and you don't care a straw about me. You put them just to save me the pain of a refusal."

"No, no, Mr. Vernon, you are wrong! I do care for you. I do like you; you are almost the only person who has been kind to me," and here her lip quivered, and her voice broke.

"That's only gratitude! I hate gratitude," he interrupted. "Come," reaching over and taking the pen from her hand, "say one thing or the other honestly—yes or no! Don't think of money, or fine clothes, or fine houses, but just of

me, Gilbert Vernon. Could you be happy with me. Rich or poor, will you be my wife?"

"Yes, Mr. Vernon, I will," she answered at last in a whisper.

"Can you say, Gilbert, I never cared for anyone in the world as much as I do for you? Look me full in the face and tell me that. Come now."

"Gilbert," she repeated, fascinated by his insistence—his eager, ardent, breathless impetuosity.

"Gilbert, I never cared for anyone in the world as much as I do for you, but I am not worthy of you."

"And you will marry me soon, and be my companion for life," ignoring the last speech.

"Yes, if you wish."

"Tell me why you have been so distant and cool to me for the last ten days—why, when I spoke, you scarcely answered; when I looked at you, you turned away; when I intrigued and manoeuvred to find you alone, you fled the moment you saw me—tell me," taking both her hands "the reason of this—for I insist on knowing it—why did you avoid me?"

Whatever the reason was she could not develop it now. There, as if turned into a statue, stood Miss Fane in the doorway. The tableau she saw was quite enough for her—Gilbert holding both that girl's hands, and bending towards her as if he were literally hanging on her words. It could mean but one thing (for Gilbert was by no means given to such demonstrations)—he was, as she had predicted, befuddled by this odious girl, and he was going to make her his wife.

Her surmises were perfectly correct, the impending marriage was immediately announced, and, after a short time, took place very quietly. Miss Fane was not bridesmaid, but she evinced a great interest in the whole affair, and gave her intimate friends a sketch of the bride in the blackest tints.

The happy couple left for a long tour on the Continent, George carrying with her one secret she had not dared to divulge to her husband.

"Indeed," she said to herself, "there was no occasion that he should know, and there was her promise to Grace, and he was naturally of such a very jealous disposition there was no use in making him unhappy, and he had really and sincerely every thought of her heart."

All the same, he was not aware that this was not the first time the pretty girl beside him had been a bride, and his was not the first wedding-ring that had been placed on her finger.

CHAPTER XIII.

LET us imagine that four years have elapsed since the close of the last chapter—four years of many changes, social and political; four years of births, marriages, and deaths; and four very happy years for George Vernon.

She reigns as mistress where she once lived as lady-companion, for Lady Maxwell is dead. She was carried off by a sharp attack of bronchitis the year after her nephew's marriage, and George ranges at will through those great stately reception-rooms and old-fashioned pleasure-grounds mistress and monarch of all she surveys. She has many friends now. Mrs. Gilbert Vernon is a great lady in her way. She is a beauty, she is very popular with high and low, she is a total contrast to shy, defiant, miserable Miss Grey, and often wonders if she can be the same person.

Look at her now, as she sits under a haycock in the pleasure-ground this broiling August day, supported on either side by a son in a short white frock—too young to understand fairy tales; but not too young to understand straw-berries.

These are Messrs. Jack and Alick, aged two and three. They like nothing so much as a good play with mother, and mother (who looks younger now at twenty-four than she did at twenty) indulges them very often in a good romp. At the present moment there is a truce—a truce dedicated to demolishing a leaf of strawberries; but Mrs. Vernon's hair is a good deal tumbled, so is her white dress, so is the haycock.

"Now, boys," she says, tossing away the cabbage leaf; "I really cannot play any more—it's too hot; and, besides, this, it will soon be your tea-time. If anyone was to come you have made me not fit to be seen."

Some one did come stealthily across the grass just in time to hear this speech. Mr. Vernon looked over the top of the haycock, and discovered his family reposing in a row on the other side. He thought them a very presentable-looking party—that his wife was always fit to be seen, and never more so than now. After this secret inspection he gave a little growl, which was responded to by a scream of delight, and toppled a quantity of hay down upon his indignant wife and delighted offspring.

"Gilbert! Yes, you, of course," she said, as she jumped up and pushed a quantity of hay out of her smiling eyes; "how early you are home!"

"Not a bit of it, it's nearly five o'clock, and nurse is looking for these young people, to take them in and make them tidy for tea. She told me she had hunted for you high and low. A nice thing for the mistress of the house to be playing hide-and-go-seek with her servants," he added with a twinkle in his eye. "Here, Jack, I'll give you a ride home," hoisting the youngest on to his shoulder as he spoke; and George with Alick by her hand, walked by his side across the newly-cut grass towards where a portly figure was standing on the terrace steps, shading her eyes with her hand and looking out for the party.

A charming family group anyone would have said who had an eye for a good subject. The pretty, tall girl, in the rather tumbled white dress, leading the curly-headed little boy in the short, stiff petticoats, makes a very good pendant for the dark young man with the child on his back, whose chubby fingers are fastened tight round his neck, whose little fat legs are stuck out in front, and who is administering very telling kicks with them from time to time, as if he wished to hurry the mode of progression.

"I say, young gentleman," expostulated his parent, "you need not break my ribs, you know! I see a bad look-out for your pony some of these days. I suppose the quicker I go the sooner I'll get rid of you," beginning to run, and, after making an extensive circle, jumping two flower-beds, he arrived tolerably breathless at the foot of the terrace, and handed over his very reluctant rider to Mrs. Martin, his nurse, who, in spite of screams of "Fader—more—more," was borne away tea-wards.

"We are a nice pair of objects if anyone happened to drop in," said Gilbert, standing at the foot of the steps and gazing at his wife, with a broad smile. "Your hair, my love, is like a haystack; and look at my collar and tie! But don't go in yet, George; come away down here," indicating a rustic seat. "I have a great piece of news for you!"

"News!" walking slowly beside him. "Something about politics, I'm sure," she said, with a smile. "You are going to canvass the county. I knew it was coming."

"No, madam;" putting his arm inside of hers, with a little gesture that would show any looker-on, if there were one, that these married folk were lovers still; "wrong for once, and, with all your cleverness, you would never guess it. So sit down here," indicating a bench under a beech-tree, "and just listen to me."

It will be seen that the Vernons were an unusually happy couple. You had only to look in their faces to be aware of that fact.

After George's rather strange, eventful, and not very happy girlhood, she had found a haven of repose at last.

Not a cloud had ever ruffled her married life. Never had she and Gilbert had even one disagreement!—and how few can say this!

He (like many cynical, apparently invulnerable bachelors) had made the very best of husbands and fathers. His home was everything to him; his wife was his idol; two such children never were seen as Jack and Alick, in his opinion, though he kept these opinions very prudently to himself.

Even George had no idea of all she was to Gilbert. He did not show her the whole of his heart, from a latent fear that she might use her power, and perhaps despise him.

All the same he was master. When he said a thing he meant it; what he ordered must be done. Everyone about the place was aware of that, as well as of the fact that he was the best and most liberal of employers.

The old manor and lands were fittingly ruled now by a firm, light hand, and everything prospered with Gilbert Vernon and all his belongings.

And George was so happy now, loved so thoroughly, so absorbed in her present life, that she looked back on the past as through a haze.

Her real life began when she married Gilbert Vernon. Could that other ceremony in the dreary dirty little office at Portsmouth have been a dream!

She could not realise it, and she shrank from the mere recollection of Peter; and Peter Blaine's existence had never been made known to the man beside her. It never need; it was just the one little corner of her mind he might not look into, and did it matter? No!

He was so jealous, he had such a belief in her love, her first love being all for himself, that she dared not break the spell.

To him she was the purest, the most innocent, the most adorable and unsophisticated of her sex! And so in a certain sense she was; but still there was that other man in the back pages of her life—pages he had never read, and never need read, she told herself. She tried to put the thought of this secret from her, and to a great extent succeeded.

Present happiness is a great antidote to disagreeable recollections. Only for her promise, her oath to Grace, she would have told him ere she married him, she assured herself, when her conscience smote her.

And when Grace had paid her a long visit, the year of her marriage, and she had begged her to release her, Grace had said, "not now, not now, some day."

George had felt at the time glad of the reprieve, and had felt a thrill of guilt. As she was conscious of this relief—and Grace's permission had never come, for Grace was dead, had died quite suddenly—that was the only cloud that had marred George's happiness during the last four years; and many bitter tears she had shed for poor Grace, tears tenderly wiped away, at last by time and by Gilbert.

This was the only shadow that had fallen on George's path up to the present; and as we see those two handsome, radiant young people sitting together under the beech tree—she with a fan of leaves in her hand, beating off the midges and agitating the sultry air, he with his hand leaning on the bench behind her—we would say that they were the very beau ideal of a happy pair, and so they are!

But alas! for their sunny days. Alas! for their serene horizon. Already unknown to them, a small cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, has arisen in the West.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN the last chapter we left Gilbert Vernon on the eve of imparting some wonderful piece of news to his wife, as they sat side by side on the rustic bench under the beech trees.

"I called for the afternoon post," he said, pulling several letters out of the breast-pocket of his coat and sorting them, and selecting one with a business-like blue envelope. "This concerns you, George. What do you say to being a great heiress?"

"I—I—an heiress!" taking the missive from his hand with a laugh of hearty amusement. "Someone is making fun of you, or you are making fun of me. Let me see"—unfolding the paper in her hand.

The writing was evidently feigned, being a thin, backward hand, written with leisure and care.

"To Mr. Gilbert Vernon,—"

"Sir,—If you will go to Hillford, and call at 22, Peter-street, and make a purchase, you

will find that your wife is a great heiress; and that you and she have every reason to be grateful to a

"BLACK CABINET."

"It has been written by some lunatic!" exclaimed Georgie, when she had read it through three times. "You are sure," turning over the envelope, "that the postmark is not Haulwell or Colney Hatch?"

"The postmark is Maxton, as you may see for yourself. I wonder whether there is anything in it, or is it a note from some madman, posted by mistake? You had no relative who could possibly leave you money, had you?"

"No, not a soul. There was Uncle George, to be sure. He was as rich as Croesus; but he left no will. All his estate went to the Vances. I have no relations in the world that I know of besides them and Lottie."

"Then you can't make head or tail of this thing!" said her husband, thoughtfully, pulling his moustache. "You don't think it is worth while looking after? I might run down to Hillford to-morrow, and call at the address. There would be no harm in that—eh? What do you say?"

"No; only it's a long journey for such a wild-goose chase, and we were going to a tennis-party at the Coventry," objected his wife, as she slowly folded up the mysterious letter.

"I wonder your curiosity is not more concerned," said her husband, looking at her with smiling, questioning eyes.

"If you knew as well as I do how utterly impossible it would be for me to come in for a sixpence you would still be more surprised if I showed any anxiety about the matter. I can count my relations on my fingers, and I can assure you that not one of them is likely to give or leave me a halfpenny. You must be satisfied with me as I am. A penniless young woman I married me—a penniless young woman I shall always be as far as any future of my own is concerned. My face, nodding at him, "is my fortune, and that letter is a practical joke, if written outside the walls of an asylum—and a very impertinent practical joke, too!"

"Well, you should know best. All the same, my curiosity is roused. It's only half a day's journey from here to Hillford, and instead of accompanying you to the tennis-party, I shall go to Peter-street to-morrow. We will not mention my errand, you know," he concluded, with a smile, "and it may turn up trumps. Perhaps some old miser has taken a fancy to you and left you his hoards."

"Not likely, you silly Gilbert! But as you are bent on believing the Black Cabinet and—what a funny signature!—on taking this journey—I will go, too. It is like an adventure; and, at any rate, if the worst come to the worst we will go and see the Vances."

"That would be the worst coming to the worst with a vengeance," he returned, with a laugh. "I don't wish to make their acquaintance. Although they are so fond of you now, I have not forgotten how ready they were to leave you in the lurch once upon a time. But you are a soft-hearted little goose, and have forgiven them long ago."

"It was partly because they treated me so—so strangely—"

"Badly, you mean," he suggested.

"That you took pity on me. I have to thank them for that, and you know where pity led you."

"Into matrimony. Well, can't be helped now. I'm chained up for life. Perhaps I might have gone farther and fared worse. But, seriously, Georgie, about this start to-morrow. If we go, we must be out of this by nine o'clock, so make up your mind," standing up, and looking down at her. "Are you coming?"

"Of course I'm coming," rising and putting on her hat. "Pray don't imagine that I'm going to trust you all the way to Hillford by yourself, with the chance of falling in with my fascinating cousins. Certainly I am coming. But all the same," now taking his arm and giving him a pinch as she spoke; "oh! greedy, money-seeking Gilbert, I know that we are both going on a nice

fool's errand. I must send over a note of apology to the Coventry. I wonder what they would say if they knew that we had thrown them over for an invitation all the way to Hillford, and from the Black Cabinet of all people!"

Here the couple turn the corner of a walk, and a laugh is the last we hear of them.

The next day we observe Mr. and Mrs. Vernon climbing the steep, cobbled-paved High-street of Hillford, in quest of their destination.

Georgie knew every turn and twist of the old town, and it is an unusual event to see such a good-looking, prosperous looking couple as she and her husband diving into the narrow alleys and back streets. She, in a neat-fitting tailor-made costume, with a bewitching little toque on her head, and a parasol in her hand, daintily pilots her lord and master down steps, up lanes, round corners—she had not been born and bred in Hillford for nothing.

At last she came to a full stop before a large, low, dark-looking, uninviting shop, crammed so full of old second-hand articles that they actually overflowed into the street, and looking back at her companion, with an impressive nod and gesture with her parasol, said—

"Here it is; this is twenty-two. Do you do the talking?"

It was very easy to say "do you do the talking," but Gilbert had no idea, now that he had arrived, of what he was to ask for.

The letter said "make a purchase," but, glancing hopelessly around the dark, crowded interior, there seemed about a couple of thousand articles to choose from—from, indeed, tables, Sherraton chairs, bronzes, carvings, and old china, down to broken fenders and spoutless teapots, and over all there was a cloud of dust, and the atmosphere was decidedly stuffy.

"What might you be pleased to want?" said a loud female voice from some black recess in the background; and presently an immensely fat woman, with a bonnet on her head, huge earrings in her ears, and her mouth full, came waddling towards them, apparently disturbed in the enjoyment of her mid-day meal, which must have been largely composed of onions, judging by the aroma that filled the shop.

"We wanted to look at some old furniture," said Mr. Vernon, promptly; "got any Chippendale chairs—any brass-mounted things?"

"Oh, ay, folks is all for Chippendale things these times," she returned, pushing and dragging away a pile of furniture to her left, and knocking down half-a-dozen saucepans with an awful clang; "but I've seen the time as we could not get them off our hands—no, not at no price. Is this the style o' thing you mean?" lugging out two dusty chairs, with filthy, tattered covers, inch deep in dust.

"Ah! something in that way," doubtfully, looking appealingly at Georgie, who was turning up her sensitive nose at the dust and the odour of onions.

It was easy to see that she was not at all enthusiastic with regard to the chairs, and the shopwoman suddenly said, as if struck by a happy thought,—

"You never happen to be the people as was coming about the Japan cabinet—eh?" pausing, and surveying them with her hands on her hips, and an air of magisterial severity.

"A cabinet! Yes, I think that's more in our line. Show us a cabinet," said Gilbert. "What do you say to a cabinet, Georgie?"

"There's one been at the back this good while. A woman came in the other day and looked at it, and said as it was likely a young gentleman would call in a few days and buy it—and give a good price for it, too!"

"Oh! What sort of a woman?" demanded Mr. Vernon.

"Elderly; big, bony sort of person. She came here the other morning and turned out half the shop, and never bought a sixpence worth. I thought she was some broker, and ere she went away she had a great look at this," now indicating a small black japanned cabinet which she placed on the counter. She says to me, says she, 'a party that lives a long way off, a young gentleman, will call and buy this,' now dusting the

cabinet with her apron, "and will give you a good price for it, so she said."

"And pray how much do you call a good price?" inquired Gilbert.

"Well, I know it's a valuable article; why anyone could see that, and a great curiosity; but since it's been standing here a good while I'll make it twelve pounds," in a tone of voice that implied she was doing them a favour.

"Twelve pounds!" almost shrieked Georgie, her woman's love of bargaining and chaffering coming at once to the front. "Twelve pounds for that horrid, dingy, old thing! You mean twelve shillings!"

"Ay, miss, but you're fond of a joke, I can see that. The gentleman will tell you what a really valuable thing it is. He is a judge, I can see. Its like would not be easily matched!"

"I should think not!" screamed Georgie, contemptuously, with an impudent shrug of the shoulders.

"I say, look here," broke in Gilbert, "I'll give you half—I'll give you six pounds—come now!"

"Gilbert!" ejaculated his wife, in a tone of exasperation.

"Done with you then, sir," replied the fat woman, briskly. "Where shall I send it to, please? Here, Samuel—Samuel—lend us a hand with this," dragging the cabinet forward and preparing to lift it off the counter. You've got a bargain, that I will say—"dusting as she spoke—"and it's yourself has a real eye for a good thing," greedily closing on six sovereigns, and adding, "guineas, I think, sir!" holding out her other hand.

"No, no," shaking his head, with a laugh. "Send it straight off to the station. Perhaps you had better wrap it up in sacking or something."

"Well, I'll see if I can do that for you. Here, Sam, give a hand," now lifting it down with a great deal of ceremony, and depositing it on the floor. "It's a real good, solid piece of work, and no gimcrack, that you can see. It belonged to a rare queer, old man. We got it at his auction, a matter of five year ago. It's never been stirred since. Ay, but he was a regular old miser, and as mad as mad could be—Mr. George Harvey!"

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN Georgie heard that the ugly old cabinet had been the property of her wealthy uncle she began, for the first time, to believe in the letter and the advice it contained.

So eager was she to test and search the cabinet that it was with difficulty she could keep her hands off it till they reached home; but as it was tightly sewn up in dirty sacking and placed in the railway-van she had to possess her soul in patience till that very evening late.

When dinner was over, and there was no chance of any interruption, the black cabinet was investigated thoroughly by its new owners.

It was placed upon a table in Georgie's boudoir, and she and her husband stood before it, not unnaturally full of expectation.

He pulled out drawer after drawer, whilst she contented herself with looking on, and exclaiming with disgust, as drawer after drawer so far revealed nothing but dust, rubbish, or emptiness.

The drawers were all actually taken out and emptied. They only contained shells, some trumpery coins, a bundle of old letters, chiefly from ladies.

These Georgie took possession of, and, sitting down at her table, began to make herself mistress of their contents.

"What a hand this Dorothy Warren wrote!" she muttered, "and what rubbish! Here are a dozen from Dorothy Warren," dealing them out on the table before her as if they were a pack of cards; then taking them up one by one, and reading the faint Italian writing with puckered brows and constant ejaculations.

Meanwhile her husband still stood before the cabinet, very much interested in that ancient piece of furniture.

"I'll tell you what it is, Georgie," he said at last, "never mind that maudering rubbish. I

believe there's a secret drawer in this," rapping it with his knuckles, "and I don't go to bed till I find it and its contents."

"Make no rash vows," said his wife, looking up. "It's my belief that there is no secret drawer—no anything, but those too funny letters. The whole thing was what is called, in vulgar parlance, 'a plant,' got up by that horrid woman in the shop to sell her old rubbish, and she must have been astonished at her own success, dragging us half across England to buy this valuable, as she calls it, which is only fit for our own lumber-room."

"Never mind, Mrs. Vernon. We can afford a freak of fancy, and we have not come to the bottom of this yet," now proceeding to take out his handkerchief and measure certain parts of the cabinet in search of a clue to the secret drawer.

A silence of some considerable time ensued. At length it was broken by his companion, who, throwing down the last letter, said, as she leant her elbows on the table, and looked up at her husband with a pair of most tragic eyes,—

"What do you think, Gilbert? This Dorothy Warren, who wrote all these love-letters to Uncle George, and called him her own sweetheart, and all sorts of silly names, was all the time a married woman!"

"I daresay," returned Gilbert, coolly, not even taking the trouble to turn his head, and absorbed in his cabinet.

"You daresay!" she echoed, "and you are not a bit shocked. Oh, fie, Gilbert! Pray, what would you think of me if I took to writing such letters to some other man, not you, and calling him my hero and my sweetheart!"

"You! Oh, that's quite another affair," now looking at her with a smile; "but this Dorothy Warren and her improprieties are no business of mine. Her husband should have locked her up or looked after her."

"Supposing you had been her husband!"

"Supposing nonsense!" still struggling with a drawer all the time. "He must have had some sort of inkling of the sort of woman she was before he married her—unless he was a fool."

"That does not follow, you silly, ignorant Gilbert. I thought you prided yourself on your knowledge of the world. Don't you know, my dear boy," laying her hand on his arm, "that we are all on our very best behaviour till we are married!"

"Were you?"

"Of course, of course. Can you ask!"

"My dear girl, you are a mere child in some things, and as transparent as a pane of glass," now pausing, and looking at her with serious eyes. "Your great charm for me was —"

"Is, you mean," correcting him.

"That you knew nothing of the world and its wicked ways. That I believe you never spoke three civil words to any man but myself. I was first."

Why did his wife tremble, and become scarlet, and then pale?

He noticed the sudden change, but had no trace of suspicion as to the cause.

"Are you ill? What is it? Here," reaching a chair, "sit down."

"I'm not ill—only I felt giddy for a moment."

Truly, indeed, her brain had reeled for an instant, as the thought flashed through it—"What if he knew!"

As her handsome, her adored, her jealous Gilbert had paused in the act of shaking, banging, peering, and prying, of lifting lids, and trying locks, had stooped and looked down tenderly into her eyes, and said, in his ignorance, "I was the first."

"I really was afraid you were going to be ill, or to faint, or something," he proceeded. "No, no, I would rather have blown my brains out—such as they are—than marry one of your society girls, who are as knowing as so many foxes, and as deep as the sea. There is only one wife worse than they are."

"And that is—!" faltered Georgie, looking anxiously up into his face.

"And that is," speaking very emphatically, "a woman with a past!"

Her heart sank like lead—never had she felt

such tremors as now. Was she not a woman with a past? And he, who was so open with her, who gave her literally a right of way through his mind!

It would be a greater crime this secrecy in his eyes than in that of a man who had plenty of secrets of his own, and one or two dark corners in his life.

Not that she had done anything wrong—no, no; her only mistake was in not making a clean breast of all before her second marriage.

Her second marriage was to her first; she never could believe that she had ever been the wife, even in name, of anyone but her present husband, who had now returned to search the cabinet with redoubled energy.

He was a man of determination—not to be easily balked; and after emptying out all the drawers, he proceeded to prise away the back of the cabinet with the poker, but before he had given it more than two good blows a sliding panel fell back with a jerk, and revealed papers.

"Oh!" he cried, "here it is! This is what we have been looking for. I believe I have got hold of your Uncle George's will!" dragging forth the treasure-trove as he spoke.

"Never!" exclaimed Georgie, springing to her feet, and looking over his shoulder as he unfolded a long piece of writing paper, and read at the top in a crabbed hand—

"LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF GEORGE NELSON HARVEY."

The two young people perused it with breathless interest, and their perusal did not take long; it came to an end just over the page. It was short, concise, and very much to the point. It was duly dated, signed, and witnessed, and it left everything of which the testator died possessed to his youngest niece, Georgina Grey.

Gilbert and his wife stood looking at each other for some seconds in silence, and then at the important treasure-trove they had just discovered.

"Well, Georgie," said her husband, breaking the silence first, "the letter was right; you are a great heiress, after all!"

"Do you really think so?—that it is a proper will?" she gasped, for this unexpected *dénouement* had taken away her breath.

"I'm sure it is; but anyway I'll send it to my solicitors."

"What will the Vances say?" was her next ejaculation, as she gazed at her husband with parted lips and dilated eyes.

"It's an awful sell for them, certainly; but I cannot say that I am very sorry for them!" he replied, with decision.

"I am not half as glad as I might be, Gilbert—is it not strange? I feel as if, I cannot tell you, as if it would not bring luck, and as if we did not want it! I had the same feeling about the search for the cabinet; I did not want to go. I don't understand myself!"

"You will soon understand that you are the owner of eighty thousand pounds, my dear. It's a thing your brain will grasp without any trouble. The fact is, you are tired and excited after your long journey yesterday; you will be pleased as Punch to-morrow," kissing her and smoothing back the little curls from her forehead. "Accept my warmest congratulations, Mrs. Vernon."

"Strange that it should come to us who do not want it!" she said, drawing the paper towards her with rather timid fingers. "If it had come five or six years ago—"

"Ah! if it had! then you would never have gone out as companion; then you would never have had the pleasure of meeting me—think of that!"

"Yes, there is something in that," looking back at him with a smile.

"Then besides, my dear, you must remember that you have children. Alick is all right, as this place is strictly entailed on our eldest son; but this of yours will come in very nicely for poor Jack."

"Poor Jack, indeed! he will be rich Jack now; as rich as Alick, I suppose. But remember, we

have not proved the will and got the money yet."

"Why you are a regular raven this evening," said her husband, carefully folding up the precious bit of paper. "Creak, creak, creak! Who would believe for one moment that this young lady," pointing to her reflection in a mirror, "had just come in for a large fortune! She does not look like it."

"I know, I know!" trying to smile. "But Gilbert, dear, don't think I am a superstitious goose, or if you think so, don't say so, but I have a hateful presentiment—I feel it here!—that that black cabinet, that will, his money, the whole three, will bring me nothing good, nothing but—" her lips quivering and her eyes filling—"some great misfortune."

"I am too polite to say what I know is the matter with you, you most extraordinary young woman!" rejoined her husband, with a smile. "I spare your feelings."

"I know that I must seem crazy; I would say so myself if anyone else were to talk to me as I am doing to you; but all the same, this horrid feeling is there," pressing her hand to her heart, "and I cannot get rid of it! We did not want this fortune, we have plenty—plenty! Oh! if anything is going to happen—if anything should take you from me or the children—"

And here this incomprehensible young lady buried her face in a convenient sofa cushion, and burst into a passion of tears; whilst her husband, after looking on for a moment with a gaze of extreme dismay, did his best to stem, soothing her and talking to her as if she were one of her own little boys, and telling himself angrily that he had been a fool to take her that long hot journey, and then to so abruptly announce her good fortune—women were queer, delicately strange creatures; it was all on the nerves.

In a day or two Georgie was quite accustomed to her new position. She had, as her husband predicted, quite been able to grasp the fact that she was now an heiress.

This news spread far and wide, and the intelligence was, needless to say, anything but agreeable to the Vances, who were resolved to dispute this fraudulent, trumped-up will to the last shilling, and a very pretty case was looked forward to by the lawyers on both sides, and a very large retaining fee was paid to the two leading counsels.

It is not necessary to enter into the particulars of the case here. It was long; it was notorious. It was tried first in Hillford, and then, when the verdict was appealed against by the Vances, it was carried to the Supreme Court of Judicature in London.

"The great Harvey will case" was in everybody's mouth; was reported in all the papers, remarked on in piquant paragraphs in society journals.

Georgie Vernon awoke to find herself a well-known character. The fierce light of publicity was turned upon her hitherto quiet domestic home, but in vain were any scandalous eagerly looked for. Mr. Gilbert Vernon's character bore the keenest examination, and people who had had great hopes of a startling *dénouement*, from hints let fall by the Vance faction, were filled with anger and resentment. There was nothing exciting about the case as far as the Vernons were concerned. They were simply a handsome, happy, wealthy young couple, and public opinion did not grudge Mrs. Vernon her legacy.

It was useless for the Vances to hint at conspiracy and perjury. No fraud whatever had been committed. In fact, the Vance family had been enjoying Georgie's money for the last six years, and would have to refund the arrears!

Mr. Bint gave valuable evidence. He had seen the will in question; it had been drawn up in a rude form, and signed and witnessed, though not engrossed, in his office. It was quite regular all the same, and perfectly legal.

After a long, drawn-out case, it finally came to a conclusion, with a verdict for the Vernons, or rather for Mrs. Georgina Vernon, who now entered into possession of the whole of her late uncle's fortune, minus the six years' arrears, which she generously did not claim from her furious relations. She even suggested mildly to

her husband that a certain yearly allowance should be secured to them, but he—being still smarting under the remembrance of their amenities during the law-suit, when he had been stigmatised as a conspirator and a forger—would not listen to this suggestion for a moment.

So the first thing this money did for Georgie was to turn her nearest of kin into the most bitter enemies; and, secondly, to make her and her family affairs the common topic of the news-mongering public.

Whilst she was staying in Hillford, on the occasion of the first trial, she saw a good deal of the Bints, for Mr. Bint, as Mr. Harvey's late solicitor, had a great deal to say to the case.

Somehow Georgie shrank from Mrs. Bint, though she did her best to conceal her feelings. Mrs. Bint was what is called a "pushing" woman, and was resolved to make plenty of capital out of her former intimacy with Miss Grey—now Mrs. Vernon—a country lady, a great heiress, whose name was in everyone's mouth; her beauty and her air the theme of many tongues.

(To be continued.)

A MILL HAND.

—C—

It was nearly seven o'clock, and in one of the cloth-rooms of the great Beverly Mills, Millport, a group of women, young and middle-aged, stood laughing and talking, telling bits of news, gossiping, and even dipping into a scandal or two.

"Hush! here comes Rhoda," said a plump, rosy girl, suddenly breaking into the hum of voices, as a tall, slender, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl entered the room.

"Well, let her come. She is no better than we are, if she does put on fine airs," said another, spitefully.

"And that reminds me I saw her walking in Orchard Lane last night!" exclaimed a third girl, triumphantly, and raising her voice, rather than lowering it.

"Alone!"

"Yes, alone at first. Then a man came out from under a tree and spoke to her, and after a few words she ran away from him, wringing her hands."

"I have said all along that she ought not to come in here to work, a stranger, and so close-mouthed," said a thin, freckled-faced woman, in a disagreeable voice.

"Do, pray, hush!—or else speak lower. She will hear you!" pleaded good-natured Annie Brown.

"Well, she will only hear the truth; and I for one believe that if the truth hurts, let it hurt," said Miss Della, loftily, and moved away just as the mill-bells began to ring in work-hours.

Poor Rhoda Ford went to work with an aching heart. She had overheard those careless, unfriendly remarks, and for a moment her lips quivered, and tears gathered under those long, silky lashes, shading the loveliest of dark eyes; but she pressed them back, and raised her head in that haughty way her companions resented.

She had been in Millport but a few weeks, still quite long enough for her beauty, her evident refinement and reserve, to rouse some distrust and make some enemies.

She was kind and gentle, but not familiar in her manner, and the women who worked with her decided there could be no good in a girl who put on superior airs, who declined to join in their amusements, or talk of her past.

They were no worse than the rest of the world, but they could not understand the sensitive pride and reserve of the young stranger, and instead of winning her confidence in a friendly way, approached her in idle curiosity.

She had new cause for trouble that morning, and every alighting word fell heavily on her already burdened heart.

"I must go away and try again in some other place. Ah, me! when shall I find peace and rest!" she thought, wearily.

A sharp pang went through her heart, as she thought of the one kind friend she would leave in Millport, Mr. Oscar Daintree, the overseer of the mills.

At first she felt a little afraid of him, but when she learned what a true, kindly nature lay underneath the gravity and coldness of the outward man, she ceased to feel any fear.

He was not exactly handsome, but a fine, strong-looking man of thirty-three or four, with keen, clear grey eyes, and the bearing of a gentleman. The employes of the mills might stand a little in awe of him, but they respected and trusted him.

He passed through the work-rooms often, but he never failed to stop a moment at Rhoda's side, to speak an encouraging word, or to win a glance from the deep, expressive eyes so truly Italian in shape and colour.

It was a long day to the girl. Once Mr. Daintree came in, and stopped and spoke to her; and then, as he moved away, she found courage to detain him a moment.

"I should like to speak a word with you, sir, after work-hours," she said, with a slight flush.

"Very well, come to the office this evening," he replied, quietly, but with an inquiring glance that she did not see.

At the close of the day she lingered until nearly all the others were gone, then hurried into the office.

Mr. Daintree stood at the window, reading a letter, and merely bowed when she entered, and she had time to compose herself before he gave her his attention.

"It is not much that I wish to say, Mr. Daintree. I believe it is a rule for an employé to notify you before quitting."

"Yes."

"Well, I wish to give up my situation at the end of the week."

"This is very sudden, is it not?"

"I decided to-day."

"Why do you wish to quit?" he asked, inwardly disturbed, but outwardly cool and calm.

"Because I am going away from Millport."

Her voice trembled slightly, and her eyes were downcast.

Mr. Daintree walked once or twice across the floor, then suddenly stopped in front of her.

"Why do you wish to leave us, Rhoda? Have we not treated you well?"

"Oh, sir, you have been most kind! But—"

"Others have not. I know it. I have heard a few idle, careless remarks that were painful to me," his face darkening.

"Ah, you believe them, sir!" she exclaimed, with a touch of bitterness.

"I do not, but others may," he quickly replied, drawing a step nearer.

"Well, how can I help it?" she cried, passionately.

"Be less reserved; talk more freely of yourself. If we do not give ourselves a history the world is apt to do it for us. I do not wish to pry into your past life, or meddle with your private affairs. I speak thus because I believe it to be best for you."

"There is not much to tell. No one seemed to care for me, and I could not open my heart to gratify idle curiosity. I lived in London before I came here. My father was a gentleman, though poor, my mother a young seamstress. I was only five years old when my father died, and poor mother struggled along alone three years and then married again."

She paused, with a shuddering sigh, and though a deeply-interested listener of the simple story, the overseer said:—

"You need not feel it necessary to tell me your history, Rhoda. I have never doubted you."

"Thank you! There is not much more to tell. My stepfather, Mr. Harris, had some money, but he soon wasted it and sank into a vagabond. Two years ago my mother died, and I went out as a governess, until Mr. Harris annoyed me so I grew desperate and ran away. I came here, and that is all. He has found me. Last night one of the girls saw me speak to him in Orchard Lane. You are kind to be interested in my poor affairs, Mr. Daintree, but it will do no good to try further here."

"Where are you going, alone and unprotected, Rhoda?" he asked, in a low tone.

"I do not know, sir."

Tears rose in her eyes as a keen sense of her own desolation rushed over her. Oscar Daintree stretched out his arms, his keen eyes soft and tender.

"My darling, come to my heart and home, and no one shall ever dare to trouble you again!"

"Sir," she cried, in fear and astonishment.

"You are surprised. I have been too abrupt, but this thought has been in my mind for weeks. I believe I loved you the first day you came here. But come, now, go home with me to my mother, and you shall have plenty of time to think of this and decide. Rhoda, love, do not refuse me!"

She wavered for a moment, flushed and trembling, her heart thrilling with new and strange emotions. Then all at once the colour fled; she drew back.

"Ah, sir, it is a great honour you confer on me! Your pity, your charity, are divine, but I must not, I will not, take advantage of them and burden you with my troubles. No, no!"

She faltered and hurried away, hardly realising what she had done. She could not believe that Mr. Daintree really loved her; an impulse of generous pity had moved him to make that offer; but her heart beat in a tumult of mingled pain and gladness.

She did not go direct to her humble lodging. She was fond of walking in the cool, quiet dusk, and the village seemed so peaceful, so free from rough characters, that no one thought of being molested.

Orchard Lane was a favourite haunt, for all along its length fruit trees hung over the fences, scattering pink-and-white flowers on the ground and perfuming the air.

Rhoda sat down in the shadow of a low, overhanging apple tree and watched the rose-flush of daylight fade away and the stars come out, while she tried to still the tumult of her awakened heart and to make some plan for the future.

While she sat there two men came down the lane, and, as they drew near, she recognised her step-father with a shudder of sickening disgust. What mischief was he planning with that low-browed ruffian!

They stopped opposite where she sat, and, fearing lest they should see her, she crouched softly down under the shielding boughs.

"I tell you it will be an easy job," she heard Harris say.

"Do you know the money's there?"

"I guess I do; saw him draw it from the bank and followed him down here, and I know it's at the mills."

Rhoda's heart almost stood still.

"There ain't nobody there at night but a puny watchman, and if he dares to resist us, we'll settle him with this."

And a glitter of cold steel flashed on the girl's horrified eyes.

All at once she remembered hearing Mr. Daintree say he would have business that would keep him at the mills until late, and overcome at the thought that his life stood between these desperate ruffians and the coveted money she uttered a low cry.

The next moment, with a furious oath, Harris sprang forward, and drew her out of her hiding-place, but, at the first sight of her pale face, he recoiled a step.

"Rhoda!"

"Yes, it is Rhoda," she said, recovering her self-control in face of the great danger before her.

"And look here, my beauty. If you dare to speak above your breath or attempt any outcry, we'll kill you right here!" said the other man, brutally.

She turned on him a glance of quiet scorn.

"I guess you'd better go along with us, my girl. It would be safer," said Harris, with recovered confidence.

"Very well. Are you going on now?" she inquired, stifling a wild desire to shriek out her terror to the quiet, unsuspecting world around them.

"Yes, now as well as any other time. If you'll help us out, we'll divide."

And so the three walked down the lane and turned into a path leading to the mill. They met no one.

The men were watchful, the girl desperate.

"Oh, Heaven, spare him! Have mercy on me, and spare him, for I love him!" she dumbly prayed.

They were drawing near the mills; she could see the light shining in the office-window, and with a sudden, desperate resolve, she sprang down the path, away from her captors, shrieking for help.

She heard the men crashing after her with deep curses; but love winged her steps. She flew over the ground, for it could be nothing worse than death.

A pistol-shot rang on the air, and she felt a stinging pain in her left arm; but she never faltered until she met Mr. Daintree at the office door.

She flung herself down before him, dabbled with blood, and sobbing out her story, slipped to the floor in an insensible heap.

It was a sunny, fragrant June day, and the beautiful, young invalid, who had been nursed by Oscar Daintree's gentle, gray-haired mother, had come downstairs for the first time since she had been carried up them wounded and unconscious.

The Daintrees lived in a pleasant old house, and its sweet peace and comfort seemed a paradise to poor Rhoda, and the dear, lovable old mistress a ministering angel.

Mrs. Daintree had been a devoted nurse—at first from gratitude and pity, and then from love, for the lonely, desolate girl appealed to all the tenderness of her tender, motherly heart.

Rhoda walked slowly downstairs, looking pale and slender in her white gown, but no longer downcast and sad.

She was free now to live in the sunshine, to love and be loved, for though the would-be robbers escaped that night, Harris was killed in a fray a few days later. Rhoda felt sorry for the wretched ending of his worthless life, but she could not pretend to grieve for him.

She wandered out into the sunny garden, and there the overseer walked and smoked among the roses.

She blushed, and would have turned back, but throwing away his cigar, he hastened to meet her, with glad, tender words of welcome.

"I have been longing to see you, my darling, to thank you; and yet where shall I find language strong enough to express my feelings?" he cried, clasping and kissing her hand.

Then he poured out his love afresh, and Rhoda listened, with the growing conviction that she could not again refuse it.

"You should not tempt me now while I am so weak," she murmured, blushing deeply, and yet with a soft, shy smile curving her lips.

And drawing the beautiful dark head to his breast, the happy lover said,—

"You saved my life, and now I only ask you to make it worth living. Dear heart, say yes!"

She did say yes, and there was a merry wedding before the roses all faded, and the mill-hands crowded the church and called down Heaven's blessing on the bride, for they felt at last that she deserved her happiness.

In the snowy regions of the Himalayas, it is said, little smoking funnels are made in the frozen snow, at one end of which is placed some tobacco along with a piece of burning charcoal, while to the other the mountaineers place their mouths, lying flat on their stomachs, and inhale the smoke.

ANOTHER use for aluminum has been tried in Russia. The mitres of the bishops are being made of the metal. The Metropolitan of Kasan has such a mitre, as has also the one of Kieff. A mitre of aluminum weighs only a little more than a pound, while the ordinary mitres are five or six times as heavy.

FACETIE.

HE: "Assuredly you were born to marry an idiot." SHE: "Yes, and I made no mistake."

"THE way to sleep," says a scientist, "is to think of nothing." "But this is a mistake. The way to sleep is to think it is time to get up."

TEACHER: "Emma, what do you know of the Orchid family?" EMMA: "If you please, mamma has forbidden us to indulge in any family gossip."

NEW BOARDER: "What's the row upstairs?" LANDLADY: "It's that professor of hypnotism trying to get his wife's permission to go out this evening."

WIGGS: "Jiggs calls his gas-meter 'the seven league boots.'" DIGGS: "How's that?" WIGGS: "He says it's the only thing he knows that can step a thousand feet a minute."

"GOODNESS, how you look, child. You are soaked." FRANK: "Please, pa, I fell into the canal." "What, with your new things on?" "I didn't have time to take 'em off."

MARY: "So you feel you cannot marry him?" EMILY: "Yes; I am fully decided." "Why, don't you like him?" "Oh, I like him well enough, but I can't get him to propose."

SPENCER: "Miss Whiston tells me that her father was a much-travelled man of letters." FERGUSON: "So he was. He had the biggest delivery of any postman in the district."

STAYHOME: "How was the weather where you were this summer?" OUTER: "Cool enough for blankets every night." MY! MY! I envy you." "Y-e-s, but we hadn't the blankets."

"THERE goes my hat!" yelled the pompous man with the red face. "Yes," rejoined the calm party with chin whiskers, "straws show the way the wind blows."

FIRST LADY (threateningly): "Did you call me a two-faced thing, did you?" SECOND LADY (unabashed): "Yes, I did; and wot's more, I don't know which on 'em's the ugliest."

JUDGE: "You robbed your benefactor in a most shameful way. Do you feel no compunctions of conscience?" PRISONER: "Before answering, sir, I would like to consult my counsel."

"You say the chicken soup isn't good? Why, I told the cook how to make it. Perhaps she didn't catch the idea." "No; I think it was the chicken she didn't catch."

QUARRYMAN: "Shure, an' it's sad news I've got to tell ye. Missis Murphy; your husband has broken his new watch." MRS. MURPHY: "How did he do it?" QUARRYMAN: "A ten-ton rock fell on him."

SHARPLEY: "Klumbay fell over fifty feet to-day." BLUNTLEY: "Whew! Hurt him much?" "No; not a bit." "Great Scott! Where'd it happen?" "In a tramcar with twenty-five passengers inside."

LANDLADY: "I believe in letting coffee boil for thirty minutes; that's the only way to get the good out of it." NEW BOARDER (tasting his and leaving it): "You succeeded admirably, ma'am."

"It was when I first knew of the faithlessness of my affianced," said Scribbler, "that I felt inspired to write poetry." "That's always the way," remarked a friend; "misfortunes seldom come alone."

THE woman was before the Magistrate for having beaten her husband in a cruel manner. "You are charged," said the magistrate, "with aggravated assault. What have you to say?" "That's just it, yer worship," the prisoner responded promptly. "If he hadn't aggravated me I never would have raised my hand to him."

THE stately steamer ploughed its way through the blue waves. "Oh, Horace!" moaned the young bride, who a moment before had paced the deck with smiling face and love-lit eye, the happiest of the happy, "I feel so queer! Let me lean on your shoulder." "No, dearest, don't do that!" exclaimed Horace, hastily; "lean over the side of the steamer."

PROFESSOR LONGHAIR: "Statistics show that Germany's proportion of suicides is larger than that of any other European country." MISS GOTHAM: "I don't wonder. It must be awfully wearing to have to think in German."

PRISONER: "Av ye please, y'r anner, Oi wud loike to withdraw me plea of 'not guilty,' an' put in a plea of 'guilty.'" JUDGE: "Then why didn't you plead 'guilty' in the first place, and save all this trouble?" PRISONER: "Sure, y'r ludechip, Oi had not heard the ividence."

HOUSEWIFE (showing sample of milk to local dairykeeper): "Look here! I bought this milk of you—it's half water, and the rest is chalk, and you sold it as 'pure country milk.'" THE MILK MAKER (with dignity): "Madame, to the pure all things are pure."

"Of course it hurts, Josiah," said Mrs. Chugwater, as she applied the liniment and rubbed it in vigorously; "rheumatism always hurts. You must grin and bear it." "I'm willing to bear it, Samantha," groaned Mr. Chugwater, "but hang me if I'm going to grin!"

ADJUTANT: "How often have I told you that the duties of a non-commissioned officer consist in implicit obedience to orders! For instance, if I were to say, 'Corporal, take your men up to the top of that tree, don't ask 'How!' but do it like a flash of lightning, even if it takes you all day.'"

VISITOR: "Can your baby talk at all yet?" MAMMA: "Yes, indeed! Baby, say 'mamma.'" BABY: "Oogle oogle." "Now say, 'papa.'" "Oogle oogle." "Now say, 'How d'y' do' to the lady.'" "Oogle oogle." "Beas its 'tittle heart! It tan talk moe' as dood as mamma tan."

"SOME day," said the morose man, "I am going to write a book. I am going to make a record of my wasted opportunities; a compilation of the things I should have done and didn't do." "What will its title be?" "H'm! I hadn't thought of that. I think I'll call it my ought-to-biography."

HE: "Really, Miss Melville—Ella, if I may call you so—I know nothing so beautiful as your golden hair and lovely blue eyes." SHE: "How long is it since you said just the same thing to another girl?" HE (earnestly): "Never, I assure you! The last girl had black eyes and black hair."

"MARY, I'm tired of your carelessness; look at that dust lying around in the corner, and even on the furniture. It is six months old, at the very least." MARY (stiffly): "Then it's no fault of mine, mum, for I've only been with you three months. It's the last girl you should blame, not me."

HUSBAND: "It's ruinous! The idea of paying all that money for a little bit of lace." WIFE: "Mrs. Astorbilt has two or three pieces like that." "But, good lands, the Astorbilts have millions where I have thousands. Don't you know that?" "Of course I do, but I don't want the Astorbilts to know it."

YOUNG WIFE: "Tell me, dearest, isn't this milk nice and rich?" YOUNG HUSBAND: "Yes, it is much better than we have had. How did you manage it?" YOUNG WIFE (enthusiastically): "I engaged a new milkman who guarantees his milk, and I have bought enough to last a week. There—wasn't that fine?"

"I AM not rich," he said, "but if the devotion of a true and tender heart goes for anything with you, dear Clara—" "It goes well enough with me, Mr. Spoonhill," interrupted the fair maiden, with a pensive look on her sweet face. "But how will it go with the butcher, the baker, the grocer? Those people must be considered, you know."

AN officer of very small stature, but hasty temper, was one day vehemently scolding at the first soldier of his company, a man of uncommon size. The soldier for some time endured patiently, and even unconcernedly, the storm of vituperation rising up to him from his diminutive chief. Finding, however, that instead of abating, the rage of his officer went on increasing, he quietly said to the next man: "John, go and fetch a stool, I believe he wants to give me a box on the ear."

SOCIETY.

PRINCESS LOUISE, Marchioness of Lorne, is expected next year to visit Torquay, in order to open the new pier and gardens, which are styled after her "the Princess Gardens."

THE Prince and Princess of Wales will be the guests of the Duke and Duchess of Westminster for the wedding of their daughter to Prince Adolphus of Teck.

THE Princess of Wales's dress in the Highlands is all that there is of the most sensible, broad-soled, low-heeled, strong, light boots, tweed suits of Redfern's neatest and most immaculate build, soft felt hats, and pretty blouses.

THE Duke of Coburg will stay in England for three weeks. He is to pay one or two visits in Devonshire and Cornwall, and he will be the guest of the Queen at Balmoral and of the Prince and Princess of Wales at Sandringham.

THE Empress of Russia is very fond of the Danish black or rye bread, such as is baked for the soldiers. During her majesty's visits to Denmark she eats this kind of bread every day, and when at home a loaf is sent to Russia every fifth day.

It is not generally known that the Queen is greatly interested not only in the players who have already appeared before her, but in all the more prominent members of "the" profession. Princess Louise and Princess Beatrice, both dramatic enthusiasts, make it their business to advise Her Majesty, and keep her well posted in all matters connected with the stage.

FOR many a year Alexander III. has been the star personage of the world-renowned Fredensborg gathering, the pivot round which everything revolved; and the idea of meeting again without him is excessively painful to those relatives with whom he was ever on the best of terms. The Czar's happiest days were those spent with his wife's people amid surroundings which our Prince of Wales found uncommonly dull. Home-loving Alexander III. used to appear at his best when seated at dinner in the rather dreary-looking Castle hall, between Queen Louise and the Princess of Wales, facing his beloved consort and her father, King Christian, and with a whole bevy of young Highnesses disposed round the table.

It is believed that some extensive changes will be made in Court arrangements for next season. The Queen does not approve of the vast extension of the attendance at drawing-rooms of late years, and yet quite recognizes the good that these large Court functions do to trade. It is believed, therefore, that the four ordinary drawing-rooms of next year will be held by the Princess of Wales, while the Queen will hold two special affairs, not yet named, at which Her Majesty will receive only the members of the diplomatic circle, and such great dames as the Queen shall deem in a position to receive invitations. If these arrangements are carried out, as it seems probable they will be, there will be two distinct Court circles, and the inner one will be very rigorously weeded and carefully kept select.

WHEN the Duke and Duchess of York went to Temple Newsam Park they entered by the east lodge, which is the most picturesque approach to the house. After drinking tea, the Duke and Duchess went out into the garden for a short time. In addition to the house party there were several guests at dinner, which was served at eight o'clock in the magnificent gallery, which is one hundred and eight feet in length; its crimson walls are hung from end to end with valuable pictures, and it is adorned with an antique moulded ceiling, a profusion of old oak, and splendid draperies and furniture. The menu cards were most artistic, each one having a black-and-white view of the Hall. The Royal Artillery band played during dinner, and the guests spent the evening in the grand drawing-room and in the library, which is twenty-four feet square, and divided into compartments by Corinthian columns.

STATISTICS.

NEARLY three per cent. of the deaths in France are from apoplexy.

THERE are at least 2,000,000 dogs in the United Kingdom.

GREAT BRITAIN'S manufactured products amount to about £20,000,000 a year.

NEARLY three million needles are in use every day.

THE average weight of fish received at Billingsgate Fishmarket is about 2,500 tons per week, or upwards of 400 tons daily.

THE largest library in the world is the National, at Paris. It has 2,000,000 bound volumes, and 160,000 manuscripts. The British Museum has a library containing 1,500,000 volumes.

GEMS.

TRUTH should be the first lesson of the child, and the last aspiration of manhood.

THE very gnarliest and hardest of hearts has some musical strings in it; but they are tuned differently in every one of us.

OUR natural and happiest life is when we lose ourselves in the exquisite absorption of home, the delicious retirement of independent love.

THE bee, though it finds every rose has a thorn, comes back loaded with honey from its rambles; and why should not other tourists do the same?

MUCH may be done in those little shreds and patches of time which every day produces, and which most men throw away, but which, nevertheless, will make at the end of it no small deduction from the little life of man.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

A SPANISH SANDWICH.—Two slices of rye bread, cut very thin. Take one and spread first with made mustard, then with cottage cheese; butter the other slice, and when the two are laid together the sandwich is evolved.

PEACH PIE.—Line a pie-plate with good pastry, and fill with peaches peeled and halved. Sprinkle the fruit with half a cup of sugar, and sift over one tablespoonful of flour. If the fruit is not juicy, use less flour and a few bits of butter. Bake until the peaches are done.

LEMON PIE WITH RAISINS.—Take three good-sized lemons and roll till soft; put the juice in a dish, picking out the seeds, and chop the peel very fine. Seed and chop a cupful of raisins, and mix altogether with one and one-half cupfuls of molasses; stir well and add a little flour and water. Do not hurry the baking or it will run out. This makes two pies. Bake with two crusts.

BLACK CURRANT WINE.—Take six quarts of black currant juice, mix it with six quarts of cold water and twelve pounds of moist sugar; when the sugar is dissolved, put it all in a cask, which must be kept in a dry, warm place; it will ferment; a little of the liquor should be kept to fill up the cask when the fermentation is over and the wine well skimmed; the cask may then be closed; this should not be bottled for twelve months at least.

PRESERVE OF TOMATOES.—Four pounds tomatoes, six pounds sugar; pour boiling water over the tomatoes for a minute, and then plunge them in cold water, then take the skins off; take as many of the seeds out as possible; put the skins, seeds, and any of the juice that may have run out into an enamelled pan, with two breakfast cups of the hot water the tomatoes were in; let it all boil gently for about half an hour, then strain it through muslin; put this in the preserving pan with the sugar, and bring it to the boil; add the fruit, and boil all till it will jelly, which may take nearly three quarters of an hour.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE telephone is about to be introduced into China.

IN Corea umbrellas are of oiled paper, have no handles, and are simply worn over the hat.

IN the royal aquarium of St. Petersburg are fish which have been on exhibition for one hundred and fifty years.

It is unlawful in Turkey to seize a man's residence for debt, and sufficient land to support him is also exempt from seizure.

THE cellar of the Bank of France resembles a large warehouse. Silver coin is stored there in 800 large barrels.

IN France a man can put away his wife if she goes on the stage without his consent; in Portugal if she publishes literary work without his consent.

THE ears of most defenceless animals like the rabbit are turned backwards, because these creatures are in constant apprehension of pursuit; hunting animals have their ears turned forward.

THE fish-hooks used to-day are of precisely the same shape as those employed twenty centuries ago. The only difference is in the material. Then they were of bronze; now they are of steel.

THE library of Gottingen has a Bible written on palm leaves. There are five thousand three hundred and seventy-three pages, each made of a single leaf.

IN the coast districts of Spanish America the staff of life is the banana; on the Pampas, dried beef; and in Eastern Asia, rice, either in the form of a soup or a thick gruel. "He has eaten his last rice," say the Chinese, in anticipation of a funeral.

CABBAGE is an old cure for intoxication. The Egyptians ate it boiled before their other food if they intended to drink wine after dinner, and some of the remedies sold as a preventive of intoxication on the Continent are said to contain cabbage-seed.

AERONAUTS cannot rise much above five miles of vertical height on account of the increasing rarity of the air, but double that height has been attained by self-registering balloons, which tell us that some ninety degrees of frost prevail up there.

A BICYCLE ambulance is one of the latest inventions, and consists of a bicycle with an ambulance attached. The stretcher is fastened to the top of the bicycle, and the wounded or sick person lying on the stretcher can then be rolled along in a gentle and safe manner.

THE pillar letter-boxes, which are to the general public the chief outward sign of the work of the Post Office, cost £11,000 a year to keep in proper order and repair. No rental is paid for them, but they need a good deal of painting, and the expenditure upon new ones is considerable.

THE National Museum of Copenhagen possesses a rare collection of musical instruments belonging to the prehistoric age of bronze. These instruments are a species of bronze trumpets called "lurs." They were discovered in the middle of the eighteenth century in several parts of Denmark, and they are so well preserved that they can be utilised musically. They have an extension of twenty-two tones and contain four and a half octaves.

IN Paris, every dish, pot and pan used in the public restaurants are under the care of an inspector. The law forbids the use of lead, zinc, and galvanized iron in the manufacture of cooking utensils. It orders that all copper vessels be tinned and kept in good condition. It directs that pottery which is covered with a glaze containing enough oxide of lead to yield to a feeble acid be seized. It orders that tin cans be soldered on the inside, and that the materials used in their manufacture be conformed to a certain standard. It is the inspector's business to look after all these things. That such a precaution is necessary is proved by the fact that out of two hundred and fifty samples analyzed at the laboratory ninety-seven contained lead.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

CONTEMPT.—We are unable to state.

R. C.—It depends upon circumstances.

AUDREY.—*Sau et sauf* (French) means safe and sound.

R. A. K.—A cubic foot of pure gold weighs 1,205 pounds.

ONE IN DOUBT.—No, you are not entitled to sell the goods.

TROUBLED.—Assistance should be voluntarily rendered.

ONE WHO WANTS ADVICE.—We cannot advise you; only a lawyer can do so.

CONSENT READER.—A wife's father-in-law is not liable for her support.

F. G. H.—The modern system of fortification was adopted about 1850.

SENTE.—To the local representative of the Inland Revenue Department.

UNHAPPY WIFE.—If the furniture belongs to the wife she can leave it to anyone she pleases.

PROUD PARENT.—Beryl is a name given to girls; we have never seen it used for boys.

MODERNA.—Arrest (and consequent imprisonment) for debt was practically abolished in 1869.

PHILIP K.—An apprentice may claim his wages during necessary absence through illness.

DISHEARTENED.—There is only one way, you must search until you secure employment.

FOREIGNER.—In England a man is always his own master after the age of twenty-one.

CAMBRIDGE.—Apply to some well-known connoisseur, or to a professional dealer in works of art or vertu.

CARE.—Those adjectives whose signification does not admit of different degrees cannot be compared.

BAMBER.—A lady's maid is usually required to understand needlework and to be able to dress hair.

J. G.—A freestone was a seat in churches near the altar, to which offenders formerly fled for sanctuary.

QUEST.—Do not play for money, but for healthy recreation, and then you cannot be called a gambler.

A. P. C.—For certificates of birth previous to 1886 apply to the vicar of the parish in which you were born.

M. C. G.—Mr. Gladstone married Miss Catherine Glynn, eldest daughter of the late Sir Stephen Glynn.

DUMB.—Not possible to say. There is too much difference of opinion on the subject.

BOX.—You cannot be discharged without notice, and can claim wages until such notice expires.

TWIN SISTERS.—Spain does not permit of us answering your question. You should get a good book on the topic.

DISMOUNTED JIM.—You had better let her keep it. She would probably assert that it was given unconditionally.

PORTICAL.—"Beneath the skies I now fear nothing but those eyes," will be found in Moore's "Lalla Rookh."

LOUTER.—Dissolve a little cream of tartar in spirits of wine, and apply gently—wiping them dry immediately.

MARINE.—We suggest that you procure some book on vines, flowers, &c., which will enable you to cultivate them satisfactorily.

A YOUNG WIDOW.—If you have any property belonging to your late husband, you are responsible for his debts as far as it will go.

HAROLD.—The profession of literature is in certain cases a very good one; and in certain other cases quite the reverse.

OLD READER.—Some can be stiffened by putting wire round, others by applying a warm solution of glue inside.

JEWELLERY LOVER.—Gold articles may readily be cleaned by washing them with warm soapuds and afterwards polishing with leather.

POLL PERKINS.—You are not too old to take regular music lessons, especially as you have some knowledge of music and are ambitious to excel in it.

A COUPLE IN LOVE.—We cannot undertake to fix the age at which two persons ought to marry. That must depend upon many circumstances.

ROBIN ADAM.—A man is liable for the support of his step-daughter until she is sixteen years of age, or till the death of the mother, if that happens first.

CURIOUSITY.—Flies can walk on the ceiling because their feet are natural air pumps, and form a vacuum so that the body is supported by atmospheric pressure.

THEODORE.—The value of coins depends more upon their condition and scarcity than upon their antiquity. Only very rare pieces are of value when much worn or in any way defaced.

DORA.—When an engagement has been broken off by mutual consent there should be a return of all letters and presents; but none of them can be claimed by either party, as of legal right.

BARNEY O'HRA.—We cannot tell you the value of such productions; it depends in a great degree upon their merit; but an unknown author will necessarily obtain less than one whose reputation is established.

JARNE NOBLE.—1. Write to the Matron, St. Thomas' Hospital, Westminster, London, for the information you require. 2. With care you would write a fair hand. We are pleased to know you like the Reader so much.

SANDY G.—"Jedwood justice" is equivalent to "lynch law." The phrase arose from the summary fashion of dealing with marauders which used to prevail at Jedburgh and other places on the Scottish border.

PATTY.—Lay it on a table, and rub it well with bran made moist with hot water. Rub it with the moist bran and a piece of flannel until quite dry; then take a piece of book muslin and dry bran, and rub it well with this. When finished shake and brush it clear of bran.

LORE ROYAL.—Marina was an Indian woman, and in the conquest of Mexico was of great aid to Cortes by whom she had a son, Don Martin Cortes, who figured in the political history of the colony. Though sold as a slave in her childhood to the Indians she was of noble blood, and was much beloved by the Mexicans.

A LONELY GIRL.—We fear we can give you but little encouragement. You might, perhaps, find a market for fancy articles in some large wholesale house or bazaar. If you are acquainted with a modern language, with music or singing, and have some aptitude for teaching, why not try to obtain pupils?

PERRY.—In assisting a lady from a buggy or carriage the gentleman places himself in such a position as will enable her to put her right hand in his, he, of course, extending his right hand, while she with her left hand prevents her skirts from coming in contact with the wheels. This is the accepted, and probably the best way of helping a lady to alight.

THE NEW MADE GRAVE.

ALONE in the house at midnight;
The shadows fit to and fro,
And the hearthstone's dying embers
Have nearly ceased to glow.
The day has been dark and dreary,
And the low wind moans and cries,
And my aching heart beats time to it
With bitter tears and sighs.

I draw aside the curtain
And press my face against the pane,
And out in the cold and dreary night,
And through the falling rain,
I see a little grove of trees
That bend beneath the gale,
And listening now, I seem to hear
A low voice moan and wail.

The raindrops beat against the door,
The embers fade and die;
My anguish overmasters me,
With bitter grief I cry.
For one dread thought sweeps through my brain,
The thought I cannot brave.
That 'neath those trees my darling sleeps
Her first night in the grave.

K. W.

BAD TASTE.—It is unfortunate for yourself that you have so few resources upon which to rely in the matter of dress; but by studying the fashions as they appear from week to week, and reading attentively the articles written upon them, you will in a measure be instructed sufficiently to conform your mode of apparel to that which meets with the most favour.

NEWLY MARRIED AMY.—They are very liable to go in the way you describe either from letting some decayed portion of the fruit or vegetable escape your vigilance, or by storing in too warm a place, or from a host of other causes. The only remedy is to carefully remove all the mouldy-looking portion and rebell the whole, and when ready rebottle in thoroughly clean and dry bottles. The most careful housewives have to submit to the troublesome operation of re-bottling sauces, preserves, &c.

MOTHER OF FIVE.—You are right in encouraging cheerfulness among your children; and as your husband, as you state, is inclined to be despondent, you are to be commended for making your home as gay as possible. Boys and girls cannot take much interest in a home that is made gloomy or unattractive by a peevish mother or an irritable father, particularly if they are both disposed to have fits of depression. It is fortunate for the "little ones," as you describe them, that their mother is of a lively disposition and prefers smiles to frowns.

DISAPPOINTMENT.—It may be that many times in the past you have been assigned to the advocacy of a cause in which you had no heart, and that your most earnest efforts have been devoted to the discussion of a proposition which you could not maintain with credit to yourself because it was the opposite of what you sincerely believed. In time you will be given what you consider the best side of the question, and then you will be able to make such a display of your argumentative abilities as will centre attention upon you and command the admiration of those who have hitherto been inclined to despise your rhetorical displays and withhold from you the praise which was your due whether on the losing or winning side.

ANXIOUS PARENT.—Anything can be carried to excess, and a schoolboy or schoolgirl can soon become a slave to the perusal of romances, if paternal authority be not exerted to prevent its unlimited indulgence. The moderate reading of general literature will harm no one, and you do well to let your children share in the delights which it affords.

LADY OLIVERA VERN DE VERE.—First wash well with a good lather of soap, using a brush (either a nail brush or tooth brush will do), then rinse with cold water. Put a quarter of an ounce of powdered oxalic acid in a pan and pour over it enough boiling water to cover the salt, stir it up, then put in the hat, hold it down under the water for about five minutes with a clean stick, take it out, and dry it in the sun or before a clear fire. To stiffen the straw, melt some parchment size or white glue, and brush it warm over the inside of the hat. Oxalic acid is poison; do not leave it about.

VALERIE.—To make croquettes, put two ounces of butter and two tablespoonfuls of flour into a pan, and stir them until they become pretty thick. Add a cupful of cream, and stir again until it becomes as thick as heavy pudding. Add a little salt, nutmeg and Cayenne pepper. Chop the white meat of a fowl or a pound of whitefish quite small, and pour into the mixture. Keep it over the fire two or three minutes, and then pour the mixture into a dish. When cold, cut it into pieces and shape it into balls. Cover them with egg and grated bread-crumbs and fry them in lard, which must be boiling to make them dry.

CLARENCE.—A nuncupative will is a verbal one, and such disposition of property must be made in the presence of at least as many witnesses as would be required for a written will. The testator must request the persons present to bear witness that the words spoken constitute his last will. But a verbal will, even where allowed to persons taken suddenly ill, or away from home, cannot dispose of real estate. The words of the testator should be put in writing as soon as practicable. As a rule, the will cannot be proved after six months from death if not in writing within ten days.

DISTRESSED DWARF.—The first essential is to take all the clothes out of the press or chest to be brushed, shaken, and hung up in the open air, either in a good wind or a bright sun; at same time the press or chest must be as thoroughly aired by being at first well brushed out, then opened up before a wide-open window or a blazing fire; next dip a piece of flannel either in turpentine or tie a quantity of powdered camphor in it, so as to form a wad, and rub over the whole interior with this; if camphor is used, put little bits of the cake here and there among the clothes when they are put in again; if turpentine is employed, lay strips of brown paper steeped in it along the bottoms of the drawers and between the layers of the clothing; you will have no moths with this treatment.

LITTLE LALLER.—In the preservation of flowers by pressing it is important that they be put in proper shape before they have withered, otherwise they may lose their shape and graceful form and are likely to look stiff and unnatural or imperfect about the edges. The flowers or leaves should be placed flat on a paper, with some smooth, firm surface underneath. Every leaf and petal should be arranged in the most careful way, and a light weight placed over them. In that state, the cake here and there among the clothes when they are put in again; if turpentine is employed, lay strips of brown paper steeped in it along the bottoms of the drawers and between the layers of the clothing; you will have no moths with this treatment.

BIRDIE.—Boil seven pounds of raw sugar, one quart of water, and three pounds of glucose to the soft ball; now remove the pan from the fire and stir in three pounds of raisins and same of currants, which must be well washed, dried, and picked, two pounds of peel cut long, and one pound of almonds blanched and chopped into small pieces (leaving half of the nut almonds to spread on the cloth), one pound sifted flour, two ounces of mixed spice, and two tablespoonfuls of essence of lemon; mix the whole well together with the spatula, then lay a wet pudding-cloth in an empty pan, and spread the out almonds on to imitate suet, then put in some of the ball as large as you wish your pudding to be, tie the ends of the cloth together, then tie it up with a strong string, hang them on a nail or pole, and let them hang for several hours until they are thoroughly cold; now remove the cloth, and ornament them with suitable mottoes.

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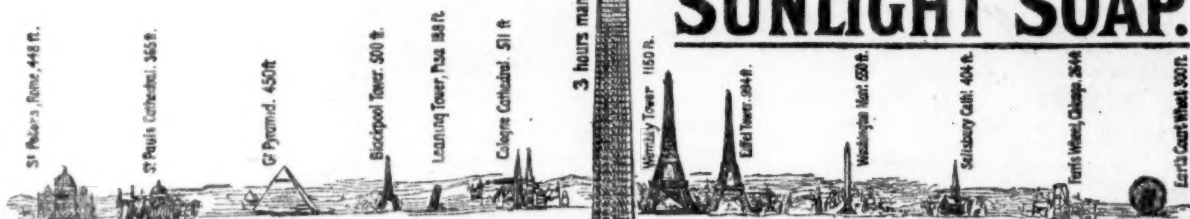
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